Rolling Stone
INDIA
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ISSUE 197

THE NONSTOP HUSTLE OF CARDI B

PLUS

REMI WOLF

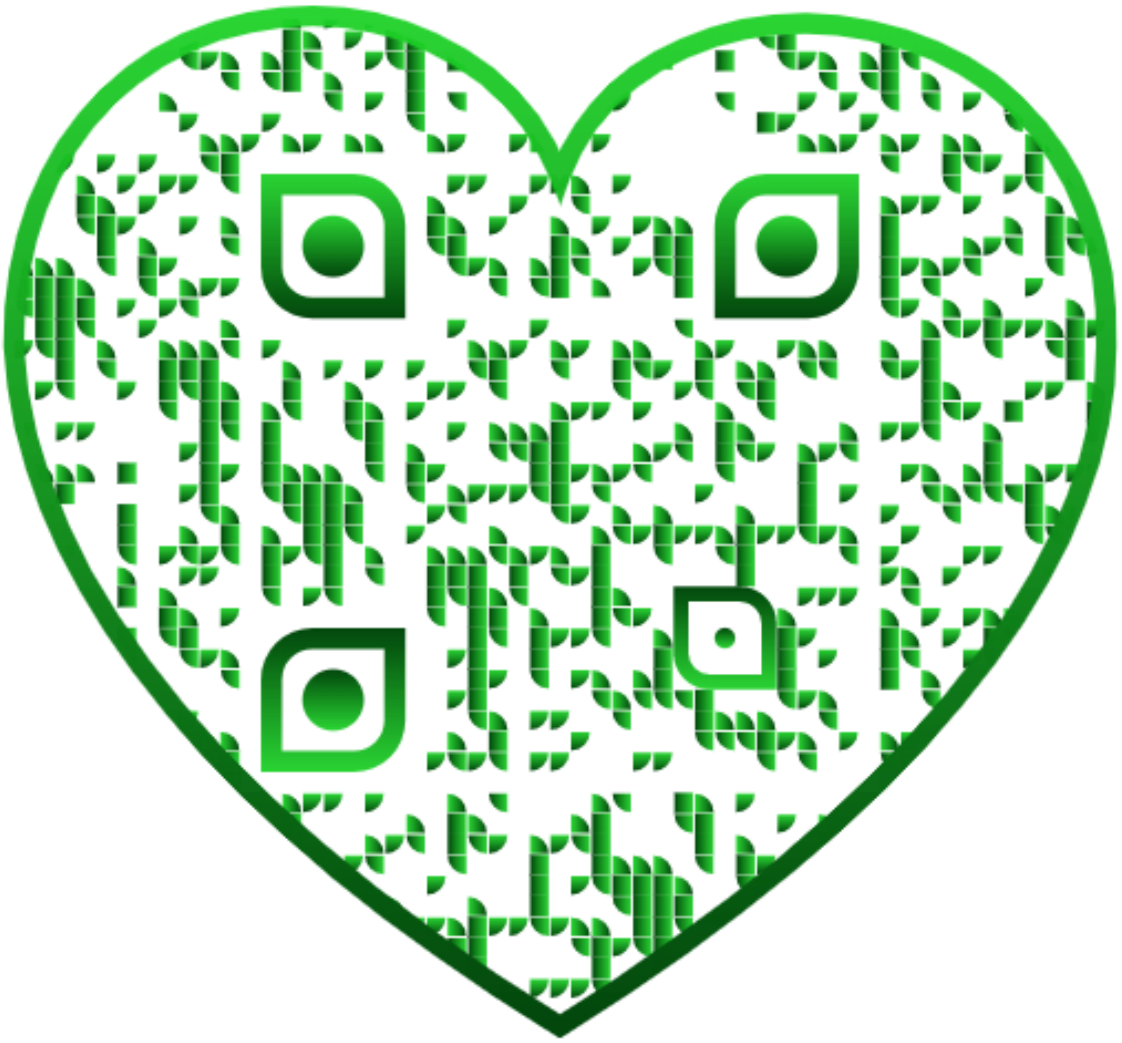
YUNG SAMMY

GREEN PARK

ST. VINCENT

DRAKE VS. THE WORLD

KID ROCK'S TWISTED AMERICAN JOURNEY



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RICH FURY/GETTY IMAGES

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Correspondence

+ LOVE LETTERS & ADVICE

"Kanungo's dedication to pushing boundaries in music and embracing diverse influences is commendable."

— Aalok Pandey

Arjun Kanungo's Grand Plan

Arjun Kanungo's cover story is a captivating exploration of his musical evolution and ambitions. From his early days to his current endeavors, the article beautifully captures the essence of his journey. Kanungo's dedication to pushing boundaries in music and embracing diverse influences is commendable. The insights into his creative process and aspirations offer readers a deeper understanding of his artistry. As he embarks on his "grand plan," fans eagerly anticipate the innovative projects he has in store. This article is a testament to Kanungo's talent and the exciting path ahead in his musical career.

SPOTLIGHT

The Local Train's Fast Tracks

The piece with The Local Train offers a captivating glimpse into the band's artistic vision and future aspirations. Their introspective approach to music, highlighted in tracks like "Tu Hai Kahaan," resonates deeply with listeners. As they chart new territories in their musical journey, fans eagerly anticipate the evolution of their sound. Their commitment to authenticity and meaningful storytelling is commendable, setting them apart in the music industry. The article provides valuable insight into the band's creative process, leaving readers eagerly anticipating their future releases.

- **Rachana Shetty**

Dhruv Dhalla's Fusion

The interview with music composer Dhruv Dhalla sheds light on his creative process and collaboration with Kavita Seth for "Mr. & Mrs. Mahi." Dhalla's dedication to infusing depth and emotion into his compositions is evident, resonating with audiences. The article beautifully captures the essence of their collaboration, highlighting the fusion of traditional and contemporary music. As Dhalla continues to craft evocative melodies, readers gain valuable insight into his artistic journey.

- **Anika Menon**

Tiger Baby Records Roars

The unveiling of "Dance With Me," a collaboration between Tiger Baby Records and SoBo House of Music, is a testament to the vibrancy of India's music scene. This funky track embodies the spirit of collaboration and innovation, showcasing the diverse talents of both entities. Its infectious beats and lively rhythm promise to be a hit on dance floors nationwide. The article effectively captures the excitement surrounding this release, offering readers a glimpse into the creative process behind the track.

- **Ajit Deshpande**

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Opening Act

PinkPantheress' Pop Coronation

LIKE ANY GOOD pop princess, PinkPantheress doesn't take the love of her fans for granted. On a recent tour stop in Brooklyn, she spent ample time acknowledging her longtime listeners, and gave a special shout-out to the young audience members attending their first concert. "It was such a nice thing to hear," she says. "I just hope I gave a good first-concert experience!" Toward the night's end, both Kelela and Ice Spice made appearances, before a confetti shower aptly closed out the show. "It was such a perfect time to have Ice in her home city — the reaction everyone had shows that she's really that gyal," PinkPantheress says. "Kelela was honestly next-level, her live vocals are insane. Sharing the stage with someone I deeply admire sonically was legendary." JEFF IHAZA

PinkPantheress backstage at Brooklyn Paramount in April

PINK
PANTHERESS

The Mix

WHAT'S NEW, WHAT'S NEXT, WHAT'S NUTS

Remi Wolf's World, in Full Color

She followed her own beat to become an alt-pop star, and she's going even bigger this time →

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **Nedda Afsari**

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REMI WOLF

Remi Wolf's eyes are scanning the immediate area surrounding the metal table we've claimed on a side street in New York's Chinatown. "Fuck, there's no wood," she says, swiveling her head around once more before finding what she's looking for. About six feet away, outside of a barber shop, sit two wooden chairs — and, as she sees it, the key to continuing her streak of good luck, or at least warding off any potential bad fortune. "I've developed a knocking-on-wood tic," she explains after jogging over to double-tap her fist against the seat. "Another friend of mine has it. Maybe I caught it from him."

Wolf, 28, has too many stars aligning at this moment to take any chances. A few weeks after we talk in March, she will embark on a two-month tour opening for Olivia Rodrigo in Europe, following up recent stints with Paramore and Lorde. Then comes the big one — or rather, *Big Ideas,* her sophomore studio album, set for release on July 12.

For more than a year, Wolf split her time between the stage, the studio, and her home in Los Angeles, settling into an insular creative cycle as she crafted the follow-up to 2021's *Juno* — the lyrically unpredictable debut LP that marked her as one of the quirkiest, catchiest artists in alt-pop. Now, she's reacquainting herself with an entirely different routine. "I made this record, did all my writing, and now here comes the other half of the job: going out and having to look good," she says. "I just try to do whatever I would do naturally, but at a certain point — when you're constantly being perceived — I don't really know how it's affecting my psyche."

Wolf noticed some signs of how all the attention was changing her in 2022, and she didn't like what she saw. "I went through this big period where I had so much anxiety," she recalls. "I couldn't leave my house. I hated seeing anybody I knew. I just deeply was like, 'I can't handle the thought of people using me or wanting something from me.'" (Keeping a tightknit group of friends has helped minimize that problem, she says.)

Big Ideas sees the return of producer Jared Solomon, whom she's known since she was 15. Her drummer Conor Malloy is another main character in the cast of her life. They met while she was attending the USC Thornton School of Music and living in a "cockroach-ridden" house with nearly a dozen people in the mid-2010s. Wolf holds a particular fondness for the people who knew her during that time, when the parties she threw and the songs she penned alone in her room were more instrumental to her education than her actual coursework.

"I was a bad student, and I didn't listen or go to class," Wolf admits. "I mean, I did go to some classes, but a lot of the classes where it was like, 'Let me teach you the right way to do this,' I was sleeping through."

Her brand of pop music, accordingly, veers far away from the melodic math of someone like Max Martin. Her verses are often sprawling and hyperspecific, as if they were leaked messages from a group chat of close friends. Her melodies will at times take on three different shapes within a single chorus. Where many pop traditionalists would push for polished storylines and pristine production, Wolf prefers distorted synths and metaphors that liken chaotic relationships to making buttermilk from scratch ("One second we're good, then it's overkill").

FAST FACTS

KENNY'S TEARS
Wolf sent the lyrics to her new album's closing track to producer Kenny Beats "at five in the morning, or something. He woke up and was like, 'I'm crying, this is so beautiful.'"

JAZZ AND JAVA
Her favorite way of finding new tunes right now: Shazaming the Brazilian jazz music at her local coffee shop.

STAY HYDRATED
She's trying to drink more water, with the help of a Hydro Flask: "It looks like a Stanley, but it's not. But it is pink and purple, and I drink out of that shit."

When Wolf was growing up in California, her mom often played Prince and other giants of Eighties pop. Her father, meanwhile, leaned toward acts like AC/DC and Guns N' Roses. The first album she picked out for herself was Lindsay Lohan's 2004 debut, *Speak.*

Wolf took a newly soulful approach to *Big Ideas,* which was largely recorded with vintage equipment at Diamond Mine and Electric Lady Studios in New York. There's a horn section on the single "Cinderella," plus the same Rhodes piano that Stevie Wonder played in the Seventies. "Soup" and "Toro" are pure synth-funk magic, while the sensory detailing within "Motorcycle" and "Cherries and Cream" is visceral — all burning rubber, chlorine, and tangerines. Wolf doesn't just want you to hear her world. She wants you to taste, touch, and smell it, too. "I am truly trying to describe what I was experiencing," she says. "We live in a world where we're eating and kissing and touching and smelling."

Her songs usually take shape, at least on paper, over the course of a few hours. The events that inspire them tend to be much longer. "I try to not paint any pictures that are at all far from the truth," Wolf says. "In that way, I don't feel like I'm directing the characters. I feel like the characters are directing me, and the people in my life are influencing what I do, what I write about, where I'm hanging out."

On "Alone in Miami," Wolf narrates a real-life solo trip to Art Basel, where she was invited to attend a *Playboy* party. "It's like there's cocaine everywhere, and I'm out there meeting people that I've never met before and making new friends," she says. "But it's all under this kind of psychotic, manic, cocaine fever dream." Wolf has been partying since she was 18, and feels as though she's mostly gotten it out of her system. "There's still a beast inside me that wants to rage, but it's more tame," she says with a laugh.

Much of her debut album circled the boundaries of sobriety, particularly from alcohol. Those lines are still blurry for her, especially in social settings. "I hate feeling like I'm somewhere and I cannot participate in what is happening," Wolf says. "There's times when I drink and I feel like shit. There's times when I'm sober and I feel like shit. I'm trying to figure out how to not feel like shit in both areas." She recognizes it as a nonlinear process, adding, "If you've struggled with it, it's gonna be a struggle for life no matter what direction you go in."

Incorporating consistent routines into her day-to-day has helped Wolf feel more present, both physically and emotionally. When we speak, she's been in New York for four days and hasn't yet been able to complete all three of her daily target goals: Go on a two-hour walk, go to yoga, and grab a cup of coffee. "It's hard to feel grounded when you're having to think about your feelings all the time," she says. "My job is to know and understand myself. It's an amazing pursuit. But sometimes I just don't wanna fucking think about myself." LARISHA PAUL

Bandzo3rd's Raucous Flow is Taking Over Desi Hip-Hop

Karachi-origin, California-based rapper Ryan Tanveer teamed up with Jabalpur's young hip-hop artist DeeKing for 'Phasna Nahi'

CALIFORNIA-BASED DESI HIP-HOP ARTIST Bandzo3rd aka Ryan Tanveer raps about having a Rolex on his wrist and Bata footwear on "Phasna Nahi," his latest collaboration with Jabalpur rapper DeeKing aka Dhruv Pyasi.

Over the last four years, Tanveer – a Karachi-born kid who moved with his family to South California at the age of 13 – has become one of the most distinctive voices in Indian hip-hop, even if the collabs are long-distance. Case in point, the 25-year-old's brief but explosive flow on New Delhi duo Seedhe Maut's "Luka Chippi," from the massive 2023 mixtape. It's become one of the most popular songs off the mixtape and Bandzo3rd has been linking up with several other topline artists like Raga ("Sir Kholkar"), Panther ("Tod Fod") ever since he released his debut song "Yaar Koi Nai" with fellow desi diaspora artist Guru Lahori in 2020.. It's become one of the most popular songs off the mixtape and Bandzo3rd has been linking up with several other topline artists like Raga ("Sir Kholkar"), Panther ("Tod Fod") ever since he released his debut song "Yaar Koi Nai" with fellow desi diaspora artist Guru Lahori in 2020.

In an interview with *Rolling Stone India*, Bandzo3rd talks about "Phasna Nahi," his journey so far and how performing in India soon remains a "top priority" for him. Excerpts:

Rolling Stone India: "Phasna Nahi" is pretty cool in that it feels like DeeKing has a flow and intensity that wants to match your signature style. What was it like working on this track?

Bandzo3rd: Working with DeeKing was an incredible experience. He's more than just a collaborator; he's a brother, and that dynamic made our collaboration truly special. When I first heard what he did on that beat, I was ecstatic. His unique approach added a layer of depth and authenticity to the track that elevated it to another level.

Speaking about your flow and delivery, how did you get to the place you're at right now, in having such a distinct vocal style that people will immediately recognize?

It all started with my [2021] single "Snitches ko Snitches." After recording it, I was blown away by what I had created and became determined to master that pattern. From there, I continued to refine and develop my style, drawing inspiration from various influences and experimenting with different techniques to create a vocal style that is uniquely mine.

"My passion for desi hip-hop drove me to create something new and authentic that would resonate with people both locally and overseas."

What is it like showing up on the radars of desi hip-hop artists all the way from California? Do you feel like the geographical distance doesn't matter so much?

It's truly a blessing to receive recognition in the desi hip-hop scene, especially coming from the West Coast. My passion for desi hip-hop drove me to create something new and authentic that would resonate with people both locally and overseas. In today's interconnected world, geographical distance doesn't matter as much; music has the power to bridge cultures and bring people together regardless of where they are.

What has it been like moving from Pakistan to the U.S.? Are you making music alongside a day job?

Moving from Karachi to Southern California at the age of 13 was a challenging transition, especially given the realities of street culture in California. Despite the obstacles, music was always my refuge. Now at 25, I'm balancing my music career with helping my parents with our family business. It's a juggling act, but I'm committed to dropping music frequently while managing other responsibilities.

Bandzo3rd says he hopes to announce an India tour soon. Photo: Satwinder Singh

Last year was huge because of "Luka Chippi" with Seedhe Maut. What can you tell me about the making of that tune and what you wanted to bring to it?

When Seedhe Maut reached out to me, I was pleasantly surprised. Hearing the track for the first time was a revelation; it was unlike anything I'd heard before. The hook immediately came to mind, and I knew I wanted to infuse it with the essence of Delhi. Despite being miles away in the U.S., I poured my heart into capturing that feeling and bringing it to life through the music.

Are there more hip-hop artists on your wishlist, from India and maybe even from the U.S.?

My wishlist of collaborators spans both Desi artists and mainstream hip-hop icons. Among the desi artists, I admire figures like Diljit Dosanjh, Atif Aslam, Arijit Singh, and A.R. Rahman. Their unique contributions to music have inspired me, and collaborating with them would be a dream come true.

On the mainstream hip-hop front, artists like Kendrick Lamar, Drake, and SZA are at the top of my list. Their groundbreaking work has had a profound impact on the genre, and I would love the opportunity to collaborate with them and create something truly special.

Is it a goal to come down to India to perform and tour? Will we see that happen sometime soon?

Coming to India and touring the country is a top priority for me. By God's grace, I'm actively working towards making that dream a reality, and I'm hopeful to announce an India tour soon. The opportunity to connect with fans in India and share my music live is something I'm incredibly excited about.

What else is coming up through 2024?

In 2024, fans can expect a diverse range of projects from me, including EP and album collaborations, several singles, and even a full-length album. I'm constantly pushing myself creatively and exploring new avenues within the hip-hop genre, so there's plenty of exciting music on the horizon. **ANURAG TAGAT**

SATWINDER SINGH

Justh's 'Chor' Went Viral, But The Artist Isn't Hurrying His Next Move

'I have a specific vision of where I want to go,' says the New Delhi singer-songwriter

EVERYONE FROM ACTOR Madhuri Dixit to pet parents to food bloggers have used Justh's song "Chor" as a soundtrack to their lives. The New Delhi singer-songwriter has arguably had the hit of the year (even though the song released in 2023) and he says over a video call that he was convinced it was going to be big even before it was out.

Seated in what looks like a studio room of a musician, complete with guitars, ukulele and more, Justh says, "Everybody thinks that I'm a cuckoo case and I'm not even getting started here." Artists will always have self-belief, but maybe they need commitment and belief on Justh's level – "Chor" has nearly 20 million streams on Spotify, 20 million more YouTube views on the music video and has been used in over 1 million Reels on Instagram.

He says this belief has been with him ever since he was a child and goes beyond making music or art in general. It wasn't always this way, though. "There was a period in my life for two years, especially when I was in 11th/12th [class in school] when I had lost all my self-belief," Justh says. He had shifted his school from a smaller one to one of the "biggest, prestigious schools in Delhi" and he was no longer "the most important guy." He adds, "I completely became part of the crowd and I completely lost all self-respect. But then I met myself again."

It might seem to some that Justh's honed songwriting and honest, world-wise lyrics on "Chor" came after years of being a struggling independent artist, but the truth is a lot more nuanced. He wrote poems as a kid but admits that he didn't know the first thing about singing or playing music. Even as he picked up a chartered accountant job at a multinational company, he scratched his writing itch and became a scriptwriter and filmmaker in Mumbai. Without getting into the specifics, he mentions a short film that he directed went to film festivals and Justh climbed up the ladder pretty quickly to become a chief assistant director on a big Bollywood film, but it tanked. He says, "I was working 18 hours a day, I was just giving it my all so I rose very quickly in the game."

> *"I have a very different view of how I see life and what I want to do with music."*

After that film's release, he moved back to Delhi and says he "meditated a lot for an entire year." Justh clarifies that he didn't mean for it to be an entire year. "I was just doing a lot of self-reflection," he says. Like he's extracting a precise memory from his mind, Justh recounts waking up at 2 am one night in 2015 and thinking he's "born for music" even though he had no music training or background. For most, the learning comes first and then the resolve to make it a profession. "I'm probably the only one who's decided he's going to be a professional musician and then bought a guitar and started learning music the next day," Justh says with a laugh.

The years of work came after that and Justh says he deliberately didn't put much music out – before "Chor," his debut single was "Dhoondta Hu" in 2020 and a three-track work-in-progress sonic snapshot and collection of demos called First Verses. On-brand for his philosophical mysticism that made "Chor" such a hit, Justh says he doesn't see himself as a professional musician. "I kind of figured out that the perfect vehicle for me to express my thoughts or my feelings around the universe, my world, my life, whatever would be music," he says.

True to the openness of "Chor" in terms of interpretations, Justh says it's not so much about the message or the medium, but the need to express. "I'm not really interested in giving any message, to be honest," the artist adds.

People have made it their own song and that's a delight for Justh, with the reach not having been backed by any label or marketing money. It also turned people towards his small catalog of prior releases, which he says has been "heartening."

Speaking of marketing, what has the deluge of attention from the music and entertainment industry meant for Justh? "Nobody's asked me that," he says with a smile. He's been through the college festival circuit, sat down at music studios, he's been at the open mics and eventually gone on to do club shows and house concert tours. "Now when suddenly everybody is coming to you as if they're your best friend, you're just calm and you're like, 'Okay, I wasn't born yesterday.' I don't want to be arrogant but I don't want to be shortchanged either," he says.

While he's got a diplomatic and even-headed stance about the music industry ("Everybody's doing their job and everybody has to justify their salary"), Justh understands that "everybody's got to ride on something that's working" like "Chor." He adds, "But for me, it's extremely important to be aware that I don't want to get swayed by this whole razzmatazz because I have a specific vision of where I want to go and I want to preserve the honesty and authenticity."

Justh talks about the journey to releasing "Chor" and how he's treating the success of the song. Photo: Pushkar Batra

True to his word, it's been nearly half a year since the release of "Chor" and while there have been T.V. appearances and big-stage performances that have made Justh a household name, there has been no new music yet. Neither has he done the expected thing and signed with a movie studio or label to have his song re-recorded and slapped onto a Bollywood soundtrack. "I'm in no hurry to ride this wave," he says.

Justh is "very cognizant" about how much money he can make by milking the success of "Chor" in terms of performances, but he's only done a handful of shows at best. It's not exactly a clear answer by his own admission, but Justh says, "I have a very different view of how I see life and what I want to do with music." It's challenging, no doubt, to politely decline offers "when real money is on the table" but the artist says it's more about doing things that feel "truthful and honest" about who he is and that's a continuous quest.

He's keeping his sense of confidence throughout the quest, in his craft as well as the "cultural shift" that's occurring in the world. "I have a feeling we're at the start of a major shift," Justh says. **ANURAG TAGAT**

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

ABHISHEK SINGH

Green Park on Making Their Wildly Indie Album 'Newly Aged'

From sitar and sarod to saxophone blended into their psychedelic, Beatles-informed sound, the New Delhi band recently wrapped up their launch tour

It's the end of New Delhi act Green Park's tour promoting their debut album *Newly Aged*, and they've just played a "homecoming" gig at The Piano Man in Gurugram on May 25th.

Drummer and multi-instrumentalist Rishabh Bhan Singh says, "We also have a winter tour in the pipeline, and hopefully some festivals along the way. For now, all we can think about is going home to our cats, Papita and Keenu, and playing music together in a room."

Green Park came together in December 2021 after meeting at a house party, with vocalist, songwriter, guitarist Arpan Kumar and bassist Sidharth Gupta rounding out the lineup. The 11-track *Newly Aged* is a trippy, pastiche-like indie experimental album, one that follows their 2022 EP *All My Pictures Have Grown Smiles*. Influenced by the likes of the Beatles and The Beach Boys, the band says in a joint response to an email interview that they've also carried forward their musical idols' penchant for collaboration on *Newly Aged*.

To that end, American artist William Schade – a friend of Singh's – "transformed the sound of the album completely" with tenor saxophone across several tracks. Singer-songwriter Amartya Ghosh also makes an appearance across tracks, including the enchanting lovesick song "The Bug." The band counts Ghosh as "someone who played a very important role in the band for a couple of years and wrote some of these songs with us."

If there's one unmistakable influence from within Indian independent music for Green Park, it's fellow New Delhi-origin act Peter Cat Recording Co. Multi-instrumentalist Kartik Pillai also appears on "Dulcet Tones" from the album. There's a sway and cacophony alike that roars just like PCRC would and Green Park does hold the band's album *Bismillah* in high regard. Among the names thanked in their album notes are Chennai indie act The F16s. Green Park chime in collectively to call The F16s as "the nicest, kindest people in the music scene."

Beyond simply saying Green Park is recommended if you like PCRC and The F16s, *Newly Aged* offers plenty of originality and does well to break new ground in Indian independent music as well. The dreamy glitz of "I Met Someone" switches up the pace a few times while retaining its pop flair. "Dulcet Tones" returns to that space towards the middle of the album, but goes further and brings in Indian classical elements, including sitar and sarod by Sashank Navaladi and additional vocals

from fusion band Pakshee's Kunwar Tanishque Jarial. Gupta says about the song, "Working with [Navaladi] was great, and he elevated the song to heights that we had never dreamt of."

Then there's the title track, which brings a cosmic guitar solo followed by saxophone from Schade that lifts the album into another dimension. There are shorter tracks like "Yahan-Wahan," which Kumar counts as his favorite along with "Coast" in terms of telling a story. The vocalist, songwriter and guitarist says, "[They] two songs that explore a crisis of identity as English-speaking Indians. In a post-colonial India, this seems to be a common experience for many young folk, so it's been an interesting topic to talk about. 'Coast' explores a feeling of drifting between seas/coasts of the US and India, while 'Yahan-Wahan' uses sampling techniques to transport the listener between jittery eastern and western sonic spaces."

Elsewhere, the reverb splashes on "Soft Toys" and lush vocal layers on "Take What You Can Get" give off a meticulous bent to Green Park's composing and production choices, making *Newly Aged* a journey like few others you'll hear this year.

The response certainly seems to align itself that way. Kumar says it's been "overwhelming" to see people request specific songs "in places where we thought we had no fans" and getting heartfelt (and sometimes funny) declarations of fandom in their DMs. "Our favorite memory is probably from the Gurgaon show when we opened for The F16s—the crowd knew our songs inside out and did not stop screaming song requests in between each song. We have never felt happier on stage," he adds.

From the Nita Mukesh Ambani Cultural Centre to house concerts in Pune and Madh Island and club venues as well, Green Park say they "wanted more dynamism" as they went along performing. With the Gurugram show bringing this run of shows to an end, Gupta calls it a long trip that they feel bittersweet about bringing to an end. Singh adds, "We've come to understand our band and music a lot better over the past month, and we are super excited about all the other shows we will be doing this year with this experience under our belt." ANURAG TAGAT

"We've come to understand our band and music a lot better over the past month, and we are super excited about all the other shows we will be doing this year with this experience under our belt," says Singh."

Inga's 'Oooh Lady!' Is Rock and Roll When We Need It

The Bengaluru/Mumbai artist talks about alcoholism, love and her next project 'Intimates'

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

IN WHAT MIGHT SEEM LIKE A LIFETIME AGO, Inga aka Aishwarya Sridharan was on a reality show about running a shack in Goa and generally part of the music and entertainment industry. Then, she went to True School of Music in 2017 on a scholarship and became a part of the music circuit as a songwriter, performer and more.

She went on to win the nationwide talent hunt NEXA Music in 2023, featuring on the cover of our March 2023 issue, right next to master composer and the platform's mentor A.R. Rahman. Even as songs like "Say My Name" and "Bad Intentions" came out as part of NEXA Music, Inga was bringing out a conceptually-linked set of three songs, the most recent of them being "Oooh Lady!" which was out in March. It was preceded by singles like "Blown My Cover" and "Days Go By," all power-packed songs that showcase Inga's distinctly free-wheeling, flower-power vocals that tell of a journey into self-discovery.

Although Inga has played everything from Bossa Nova sets to her own songs at concerts across India, her strength lies in making primal yet polished music that draws from the hypnotic rhythms of keys, percussion and of course, her vocals. "Oooh Lady!" was the final of three songs made with producer, arranger and keyboardist Rohit Chacko, bassist Arnav Lou Fernandes and percussionist Shahrukh Sherief Padiyath, who also feature in the music videos for each track.

Inga says the primal-ness comes from her need for things to be "larger than life" in her music. She says, "I feel like I have to finesse myself in social interactions too much that I feel like the stage is the one place that I can really be wild and it will be accepted and not scary [for audiences]."

"When you're between 30 and 40, it's kind of no man's land. You see very few women in the world at that age who are unmarried, single and really killing it and owning that space. Traversing this decade brings in a lot of insecurity but also assurance."

There's a special bond that Inga speaks about with Chacko, whom she found in Mumbai music circles around 2017. "I'd just moved into this house in Bandra [...] I had this cocoon and I could be as hedonistic as I wanted to be," she says. Most of these songs came from "drunken jamming," Inga says with a laugh. "These songs are reflective of that time. I'm embarrassed of that time but I'm also incredibly fond of it. In that space, I was a blooming alcoholic. I would wake up and drink gin and say, '*Chal* let's make a song!'" the artist adds.

There was an acute sense of self-awareness in those times, which drove the songs and aligned with the idea of Inga, which takes its name from Tamil, roughly translating to "here." Collaborators and in an open relationship, Inga counts Chacko as her best friend and "the only person I've genuinely loved." Her voice breaks as she talks about how "Days Go By" was for Chacko, for changing her deeply embedded self-critical nature. "'Oooh Lady!' was after I started liking myself a little bit more."

Inga has often performed with the studio musicians who have collaborated on her recent singles, although she does have a floating group of instrumentalists wherever she's invited to play in, from New Delhi to Goa to Mumbai and Bengaluru. A few hall-of-fame-level gig stories have come from it so far, like when her pants tore just moments before she was scheduled to get on stage at The Piano Man, New Delhi in January. She was desperately seeking a safety pin from anyone in the venue but instead found a patron who was willing to give her a skirt. "I said, 'What the fuck are you going to wear?' She had tights on underneath, thanks to Delhi winters," Inga says with a laugh.

The show goes on, with Inga plotting her next collection of songs. If her previous three-track set was written in 2017, the upcoming material had its origins in 2021 and draws more from electronic music. The EP (or mini album) is titled *Intimates* and might just get a similar piecemeal release plan like her previous singles towards the end of the year. "It's a woman's perspective on the world. When you're between 30 and 40, it's kind of no man's land. You see very few women in the world at that age who are unmarried, single and really killing it and owning that space. Traversing this decade brings in a lot of insecurity but also assurance," she says. **ANURAG TAGAT**

Vocalist-guitarist Rohit Lalwani from Pune blues-rock outfit Lal and the People

Lal and the People Keep the Blues Alive with New Track 'Cryin' Shame'

A full-length album is in the works too for the blues outfit

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

THROUGH THE PANDEMIC, PUNE singer-songwriter, guitarist and blues musician Rohit Lalwani who fronts his revolving band Lal and the People found solace in the resonance of his own introspection. His latest offering, "Cryin' Shame," emerges as a poignant reflection of tumultuous times and deeply held convictions. For Lalwani, crafting this melodic narrative wasn't merely an artistic endeavor but a cathartic journey through his disillusionment with the world. He says, "Being a cynic, I've always viewed the human world as a realm that's going in a downward spiral – a disaster waiting to happen. So, that notion coupled with being a prisoner in my own lair in the pandemic, the music I wrote was from the heart."

Lalwani meticulously pieced together the song's essence, weaving together raw emotions and biting social commentary as well as working with drummer Alex Coutinho and keyboardist Zion Mathew. Together, they breathe life into Lalwani's evocative melodies.

On working at Pune's Gray Spark Audio where Lalwani polished the song, he says, "For the first time, I could take the band to a high-end studio; hire amps and a drum kit; record an upright piano, and so on. Giving the band the creative freedom with these many variables involved was difficult but satisfying at the same time." Lalwani admits that his songwriting has evolved through the years, delving into topics of newfound relevance and depth. Guided by a relentless pursuit of innovation, Lalwani intricately arranges each musical piece, infusing it with a symphony of emotions and experiences. As he navigates this creative evolution, Lalwani's reservoir of fresh ideas breathes life into his compositions.

Earlier this year, Lal and the People performed at Mumbai's Cooperage Bandstand as part of gig series Sound Rise. Talking about that gig, Lalwani says, "Considering our experience and the love that we received that day, it's safe to say that it's not just a question of whether the blues could do well for an event such as Sound Rise. The audience was all in for it; it will fare well if such events are held more frequently. Let's face it: genuine, honest artists could completely take a new group of people by surprise on a sunny morning."

Next, Lalwani is gearing up to put out a full-length album while also continuing to promote "Cryin' Shame" and play more shows. "We have plans of touring across the country and playing all our new material," says Lalwani. DAVID BRITTO

How A Viral Cypher Catapulted The Ranjha to Release His Song 'Muqabala' Via Mass Appeal

Ahead of its release, the freestyle version of the song had over 25 million views across social media

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

EMERGING FROM THE CHANDIGARH CYPHER scene, rapper The Ranjha's new track "Muqabala" initially gained traction as a spontaneous freestyle, captivating listeners with its infectious vibe and the artist's lyrical finesse. The song quickly garnered a lot of attention, racking up over 25 million views across various social media platforms including Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and X. Its original cypher clip not only made widespread acclaim but also sparked a multitude of fan reaction duets, showcasing the track's impact on audiences.

American rapper Kid Cudi's recent retweet of the song teaser signaled immense anticipation and excitement for its official release. Now, with "Muqabala" out via music label Mass Appeal, the track retains its same captivating verses from the viral freestyle, however, elevated by the masterful production skills of The Kidd, renowned for his collaborations with the late Sidhu Moose Wala. This dynamic collaboration amplifies the raw energy of the original freestyle but is enhanced in a way to stand out.

"This song is all about a mirror to [the] youth. Everybody nowadays gives priority to showing off and being cool by influencing each other, that is what I observe on a regular basis around me and my neighborhood and wrote about that."

Talking about the song, The Ranjha says, "This song is all about a mirror to [the] youth. Everybody nowadays gives priority to showing off and being cool by influencing each other [with] cars [and getting] intoxicated, that is what I observe on a regular basis around me and my neighborhood and wrote about that."

With more music in the works, the artist says, "I have plans to release more crazy songs. The next song is an absolute hit too with a catchy sound and flow for sure. I will keep delivering music." DAVID BRITTO

Yung Sammy Reintroduces Himself on DESI TRILL Song 'The Intro'

The Delhi NCR-raised, Nigerian rapper fires the opening missive on 'DESI TRILL Presents... Brown Is Everywhere' EP

SAMEER MALIK

DELHI NCR-BASED NIGERIAN rapper Yung Sammy makes himself acquainted to a whole new audience on DESI TRILL's new song "The Intro," which serves as the opening track to the Desi-focused movement's debut EP *DESI TRILL Presents... Brown Is Everywhere*.

At the heart of the song is Yung Sammy switching up between not just Hindi and English, but also rapping in Gujari for the first time. He says, "'The Intro' was something like a start of my career and a new journey – not just with DESI TRILL but for me as well. It was something I felt that, 'Yaar I need something to explain myself.' Every time, I would get asked, '*Aapko Hindi kaise aati hai?*' (How do you know Hindi?) So this song is my answer to questions that people usually ask me."

Getting signed to DESI TRILL – the label and movement co-founded by U.K. veteran Shabz Naqvi and Roc Nation's Ty-Ty Smith in 2023 – came for Sammy at a time when he needed it. Originally 'The Intro' was written for hip-hop reality show *MTV Hustle 3.0* where he intended to compete. "When that got canceled, I got signed to DESI TRILL. This is the first track I played to Shabz. He was like, 'Let's drop this as the opening track on the EP,'" the rapper says.

As soon as he was signed to DESI TRILL, Sammy took up a verse on the remix of the movement's title track 'Desi Trill' that originally brought together DJ LYAN, Chip and Malkit Singh in late 2023. Now, with the release of "The Intro" on *Brown Is Everywhere*, Yung Sammy feels at home. He says, "DESI TRILL is family now. I got signed at a point of time when I thought I would stop rapping. I was selected for *MTV Hustle*, and then for one reason or another, it got canceled. Within a week of that, I got signed to DESI TRILL. It's been a life-changing experience. It's a long journey and I feel we'll achieve our goals. The vision of DESI TRILL and my vision are matching, so it's going to be a great one."

The Gujari bar on "The Intro" was a runaway hit even before the song was out, when Sammy spit rhymes in a podcast interview that went viral among Gujar communities. Sammy says the full bar is his way of dropping a hint that he intends to rap in many languages. "I have a Punjabi track on the way, in my EP. I have Haryanvi and English and Hindi [songs], of course. So you can expect many languages from me," he says. **ANURAG TAGAT**

Faheem Abdullah Talks Diverse Debut Album 'Lost ; Found'

The Kashmiri artist's 14-track album has previously delivered hits like 'Ishq' and brings in collaborators like Alif's Mohammed Muneem, Parvaaz's Khalid Ahamed, Zeeshaan Nabi, Pho and more

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

AHEAD OF KASHMIRI ARTIST FAHEEM ABDULLAH'S debut album *Lost ; Found* coming out on May 25th, we're streaming two new songs – the atmospheric, ode to his home "Kashmir" and the impassioned early 2000s rock-inspired "Khawab" featuring singer-songwriter Pho.

Abdullah has been working on the album for the last five months – comprising 14 songs that go back 12 years in the making. The first song from *Lost ; Found* was "Ishq" with Rauhan Malik which catapulted Abdullah into wider listenership. "We knew 'Ishq' would be a massy song that would be loved by the audiences the most, but we had no idea it would blow up. I was not ready for this," he says over a video call.

He says there's a loose thematic concept that runs through the album. "*Lost ; Found* could have been called *Lost and Found*, but we wanted it to be *Lost ; Found* because the semicolon is a tiny pause. There are certain songs which I've written in the state of [being] lost in my life and certain songs in the state of being in that semicolon, the point where you want to give up but then you don't and you keep going, towards found and then there were certain songs which were written in the state where I was beginning to find myself," he says.

Sonically, Abdullah didn't want to be typecast into a specific sound with *Lost ; Found*. There's the fully accessible pop of "Ishq" but also "Chak Chuk Blues" with Zeeshaan Nabi. One of the heartwarming things he heard about the album so far was about unpredictable versatility on show. Abdullah says, "Somebody told me, 'This is the kind of versatility he's showing right now and we don't know what is going to come next in the album.'" To that end, there is still an upcoming song called "Parwan," which Abdullah likens to the rawness of British singer-songwriter Ben Howard.

Other collaborators on the album include rock band Parvaaz's Khalid Ahamed, rock act Alif's Mohammad Muneem and more. "I wanted to bring everybody together. That was the whole idea of it, everybody together in one album, and representing us as a community," Abdullah says.

It's a fully Kashmiri album and Abdullah is aware that there's still a lot of music from the region that doesn't make it to "the mainland." He says, "I believe the music made in Kashmir just doesn't cross the mountains." He points to how artists like himself as well as Ahamed, Muneem and Yawar Abdal are based out of major Indian cities to thrive. Abullah adds, "For me to find my audience, I had to step out."

And he's stepping out with his debut album fairly early on in his career – formally releasing songs since 2020 – so Abdullah is happy that he could satiate the storyteller in him through *Lost ; Found*. He adds, "The album is my whole heart on a platter. I'm just so excited for it." **ANURAG TAGAT**

PROFILE

How Kate Hudson Finally Let Her Rock & Roll Soul Run Free

She's always had a great voice, but it took a long time for her to get over her fears and make a debut album of her own

By BRIAN HIATT

At the turn of the century, right around the time *Almost Famous* made her an instant superstar, word got around that Kate Hudson could sing, for real. Inevitably, the pop machine, which happened to be running at maximum efficiency in that particular historical moment, tried to catch her in its gears. "People in the industry would say, 'Let's make a record,'" says Hudson. "'Let's do this. Let's do that.' And I always felt not ready. I don't know why that was my response. Something was stopping me, and I wasn't reflective enough at the time to really think about it — until I got older, and I was like, 'Why am I so hesitant with something I love more than anything?'"

The answer, Hudson says, "was always fear of rejection. When I think about my songwriting, if someone rejected that, I don't think I had the capacity to be ready for it." Acting was a different story. "You can always blame someone else for a bad movie," she adds. "If you're not directing it or producing it or writing it, as an actor, you kind of show up, do the best you can, and hope what you gave is gonna turn out great in the editing room. Sometimes it really doesn't! But you have that cushion of like, 'That wasn't my vision. It was someone else's.' And for me, music is the opposite." The fact that her long-estranged biological father, Bill Hudson, had been a successful musician in the 1970s only added to the psychological complications.

It took decades, lots of therapy, and a global pandemic for Hudson to break through all of those barriers and finally write and record an album of her own. The result, *Glorious,* is one of the year's most pleasant musical surprises, a thoroughly grown-up and strikingly assured collection of guitar-heavy songs that tend to land somewhere between Adele and Sheryl Crow, with Hudson's big, slightly husky voice and deep rock & roll fandom always front and center. "The spirit of Penny Lane descends on everything in my life," Hudson says. "Because I *was* Penny Lane.... I love all kinds of music, but I love rock music, and I love women in rock. Linda Ronstadt is my favorite rock star."

When the Covid lockdowns hit, Hudson found herself forced into introspection. "I was like, 'What am I doing?'" she recalls. "'What is my life? What's going to happen if I die? This will be my great regret ever, that I didn't allow myself to share music. And even if it's one person who loves it, it would mean so much to me.' And that was it. Like, 'OK, it's time.'" So, she was in the mood to say yes when a friend of hers, Tor E. Hermansen of the production duo Stargate, asked her to sing a cover of Katy Perry's "Firework" for a school-charity Zoom. Soon afterward, Hudson got a surprise phone call from songwriter and producer Linda Perry, a parent at the same school. "She was like, 'What the fuck? I didn't know you could sing like that! Do you write music?' And I go, 'Yeah.' She's like, 'Well, come in the studio.'"

"I was like, 'What am I doing? What's going to happen if I die? This will be my great regret, that I didn't allow myself to share music.'"

Hudson and Perry were near-total strangers, but Hudson arrived at the studio with another, much more familiar collaborator. Danny Fujikawa, her fiancé and father of one of her children, had a music career of his own as a guitarist and songwriter for the indie band Chief, who released an album on Domino in 2010. The touring life had led to substance issues for Fujikawa, and he thought his musical life was over. "Kate brought me back into music with this album, kind of full circle, and it's been such a blessing for me," he says.

At that first session, Fujikawa recalls, "it was me, Kate, and Linda Perry sitting in a room, and it was like an awkward first date. Linda just strummed a chord and then belted some howling, crazy sound out of her mouth. That kind of set the tone for Kate, and then, honestly, we just hit the ground running. We wrote 30 songs or something over the course of three weeks." Fujikawa and Hudson eventually finished the album with another musician, onetime Max Martin collaborator Johan Carlsson, who co-wrote Ariana Grande's "Dangerous Woman," among other hits.

The album's power-ballad title track was one of the easiest Hudson-Perry collaborations, written in all of 10 minutes. "The process felt like channeling, and 'glorious' just was a word that came out," Hudson says. "It was like we were in each other's heads. It was awesome." She connects that feeling to something that she's experienced as an actor: "It's the moments when you hit a scene with someone and everything goes away and it feels so good. It feels completely present. That's the same thing for me writing music. You're so present in

GUY AROCH

it. 'Glorious' was just the best. It was better than sex."

Hudson doesn't mind acknowledging there are moments on the album that evoke the Black Crowes, the band fronted by her ex-husband, Chris Robinson. "Well, listen, I mean, talk about a foundation of my life," she says. "I was a fan of my ex-husband before I met him. I remember what I loved about the Black Crowes when I was younger, before I fell in love with him — the naughtiness and the freedom in which they chose to create. I have a soft spot for people like that, even though they're challenging and tough. Chris and I, we didn't fall in love 'cause we liked opposite things. We fell in love 'cause we were into the same shit."

Hudson, who was also once engaged to Muse's Matt Bellamy, adds, "People always go, 'You really like those music guys.' And I'm always like, 'They might like me, too!' You know, there's something about music. I've been in relationships where I can't speak that language with someone, and I don't know if I could exist in a unit where I couldn't share it properly. It's a really, really nice thing to share, and that's been why I always end up having babies with [musicians]. It's like my pheromones are like, 'We'll make a good child. We'll make a musical child. So let's do this!'"

Finishing the album felt almost like as momentous an occasion. "There's so much emotion attached to it, and personal obstacles to overcome to get here," she says. "When I knew it was done and everything was mastered and I was signing off on it, it was like giving birth to a baby — it really felt that way. I was incredibly emotional. But what was interesting was that I didn't have any fear."

Now, Hudson is looking forward to her first tour of her own, eyeing favorite venues like New York's Bowery Ballroom. And as music biopics start to look like the new superhero movies, she has a few dream roles in mind that could combine her two artistic pursuits. "I think Dusty Springfield is a really interesting story," she says. "People don't know a lot about her, and she's one of my favorites. She was very shy. She had a lot of stage fright and struggled with being open about her sexuality. That could be a very powerful movie."

Even more than that, Hudson would love to play Stevie Nicks. "The ultimate is Stevie," she says. "I think for all girls who love rock, Stevie's just our number one. But my family might, like, disown me if I ever got a chance to play her. 'Cause they'd be like, 'Can we not go method?' I would probably go way too far into that character." ®

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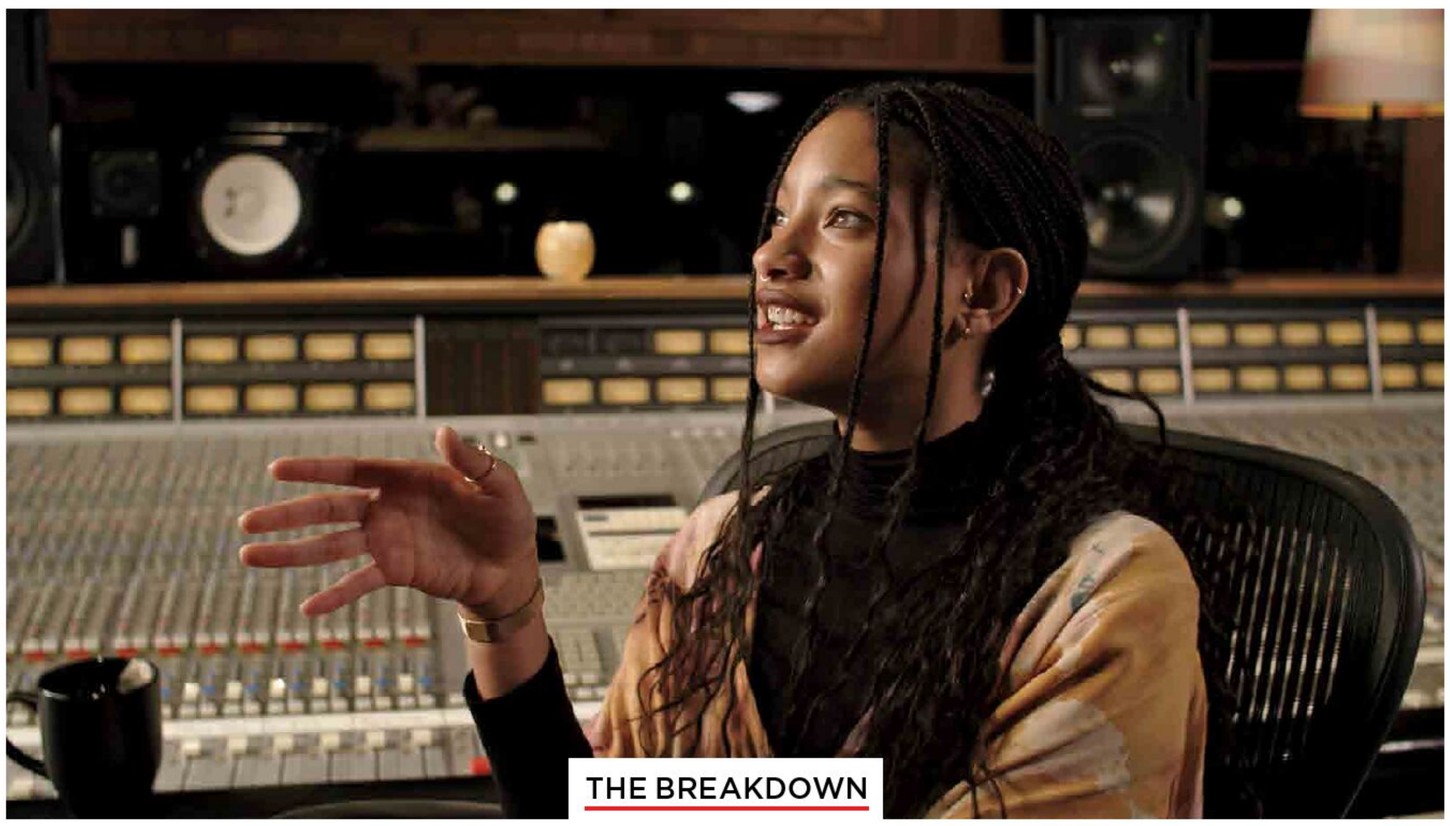

THE BREAKDOWN

How Willow Made Her Angstiest Song Ever

The singer-songwriter channeled her anxieties into a nervy track from her new album — here's how it came together

By LARISHA PAUL & CAITLIN WHITE

WILLOW WANTED her song "Run!" to evoke the feeling of a panic attack — like the one she nearly had when she was stressing out over a confrontation during a relationship. On her past two albums, *Lately I Feel Everything* (2021) and *Coping Mechanism* (2022), she wielded this type of angst through brash rock and pop punk. Now, on her upcoming album, *Empathogen*, Willow is pairing funk influences with distorted instruments to create a sense of paranoia. On "Run!," she pushes this sound to an extreme, as she asks herself a question: Will you stay and fight, or run and hide?

Letting It Out

Lyrically, "Run!" captures Willow in a conflicted emotional state. She remembers the song pouring out of her in one day as she processed the tension between staying or leaving someone. "I'm trying so hard to be in the moment and see their sincerity and not let my toxic mental pattern paint them as this person who's trying to attack me or judge me," she recalls. In the end, she chooses to leave, a feeling she calls "beautiful," but admits, "There's almost a sadness to it because it's like I wasn't strong enough to stay in the moment and see this person for who they really were, and I just ran from the situation."

Cutting the Vocals

"Run!" is one of the standout performances on *Empathogen*. "I hadn't really sang like this," Willow says of her gritty vocals. "I kind of wanted to stay away from that more rock-leaning sound because I really wanted to strip everything back and just bare my voice in its raw form." The less-polished vocal texture communicates where the singer stood emotionally: "I really wanted it to feel anxious."

Guitar Hero

St. Vincent was one particularly strong influence here — Willow credits the musician as "an inspiration for everything that I do." She was drawn to the ways St. Vincent uses guitar "not tonally, but as a feeling." Willow was initially reluctant to use electric guitars on the record, but ultimately, she decided it would be incomplete without them. "It just needs to sound messed up," she recalls telling her guitarist Chris Greatti. "It needs to be like you're wrenching your heartstrings. That anxiety needs to be there."

Putting It Together

Willow built the foundation of "Run!" with drums and bass. It was a departure from her usual process, which often starts with vocals or guitar. "I needed to start with those two things first, because they needed to interplay with each other and have that conversation," she explains. From there, the sonic and thematic narrative unfolded. "With all the vocals coming in and out — even the texture of the drums changes a little bit — it gets more like, 'Now, I'm not angry anymore. I'm just scared and needing to get away from this,'" she says.

Visual Thinking

Willow has already been contemplating video ideas. "I think that the real feeling behind the title is an emotional and a mental escape," she says. "If I ever make a video for it, I'm definitely going to be running in some regard physically, but [with] that being a metaphor for the escaping that I'm trying to do inside." She wants listeners to connect with the song's message: "I hope people feel there's beauty in our human desire to want to escape our vulnerability and escape our fears."

A New Era

"Run!" is just one song on *Empathogen* that helped Willow break away from past habits. "With this album, I feel like I took a bat and just was like, 'No, no, no!' to all of these old ways of conducting myself as an artist and as a musician," she says. "*Coping Mechanism* was definitely a step towards that. But this was really like, 'OK, now the foot is all the way in this new place.' That makes me really excited." ®

WATCH THIS!

Check out episodes of *The Breakdown* at RollingStone.com.

EXPLAINER

Why Is Everyone Beefing With Drake?

On the night of April 13, after the leak of his diss track "Push Ups," Drake posted a screenshot from the movie *Kill Bill* on his Instagram Story. It was the iconic fight scene during which Uma Thurman's character takes on a roomful of ninja assassins only to emerge victorious. The metaphor couldn't be more applicable to Drake's situation, as he fends off countless peers out for blood. Rap's civil war began, in one sense, with Future and Metro Boomin's recent album, *We Don't Trust You*, featuring Kendrick Lamar taking not-so-subtle shots at Drake and J. Cole on the hit "Like That." But the tension appears to be dredging up feelings that go back much further. Here's a guide to all of the frenemies who have turned on the Boy. JEFF IHAZA

Future

Perhaps Future wasn't happy about Drake choosing to collaborate with 21 Savage on 2022's *Her Loss* instead of making a follow-up to his and Future's wildly successful 2015 project, *What a Time to Be Alive*. Fans have also wondered if Drake's 2023 track "What Would Pluto Do" was a sneak diss aimed at Future. The hip-hop rumor mill has been active with unsubstantiated reports of Drake "stealing" Future's girl, which would make Drake's line "What would Pluto do? He'd fuck the ho, so I did it" take on an entirely new meaning.

Metro Boomin

Metro expressed frustration at *Her Loss* receiving more attention than his own *Heroes & Villains* during awards season in a quickly deleted tweet this past December. Many fans believe Drake responded during a livestream on the gambling platform Stake, where he said, "To the rest of you — the nonbelievers, the underachievers, the tweet-and-deleters — you guys make me sick to my stomach, fam." Metro then took to social media with a series of veiled jabs about taking "sides."

Kendrick Lamar

Kendrick Lamar's disdain for Drake goes back as far as 2012, when Lamar made a guest appearance on *Take Care* that hinted at a budding rivalry. The two remained cordial until Drake was mentioned by name in Lamar's industry-shaking verse on Big Sean's 2013 single "Control." Drake seemed to shrug this off, but Lamar went further during a BET Awards cypher, rapping, "Nothing's been the same since they dropped 'Control'/And tucked the sensitive rapper back in his pajama clothes." The two have exchanged subliminals since then — and this year, Lamar went nuclear with a series of songs defined by their pure hate for Drake's very being.

WHAT, ME WORRY?
Drake is being targeted on all sides.

Rick Ross

Rick Ross has been one of Drake's most consistent collaborators over the years, so his appearance on Future and Metro Boomin's cut "Everyday Hustle" came as a surprise to many. But there had been friction between the two in the past — and after Drake dropped "Push Ups," featuring a direct shot at "Ricky's" age, Ross went into attack mode. On his own diss track, "Champagne Moments," he repeatedly calls Drake "white boy," in a tasteless reference to his mixed-race background, and alleges that Drake only associated with street rappers early in his career to gain legitimacy. The two have since waged an all-out meme war online.

A$AP Rocky

In his feature on the *We Don't Trust You* follow-up *We Still Don't Trust You,* A$AP Rocky says, "Niggas in they feelings over women, what, you hurt or somethin'?/I smashed before you birthed, son, Flacko hit it first, son." The tension appears, on the surface, to be about Rocky's current relationship with Rihanna. However, Rocky's verse also recalls Drake's last public beef, with Pusha T. Back then, it was rumored that Rocky was responsible for leaking the information about Drake's then-secret son, Adonis, to Pusha. Now, it seems Rocky might be claiming to have been with the mother of Drake's son before him — which, in fairness, is kind of an odd thing for the father of Rihanna's children to be bragging about on a diss track.

The Weeknd

Bad blood between Drake and the Weeknd started when Drake first posted songs by the then-unknown R&B crooner on his OVO blog back in 2010. As the story goes, Drake wanted to sign the Weeknd to his label, OVO, whereas the Weeknd wanted to make his own path. After the Weeknd ultimately signed to Republic in 2012, the two were seldom seen together publicly, though any rumors of tension seemed to be quelled as Drake rapped on 2019's "War" that "The boy that sound like he sang on *Thriller,* you know that's been my nigga/We just had to fix things, family, six tings we can't split up." And yet, here we are. The Weeknd appeared on several Future and Metro Boomin tracks, most pointedly "All to Myself," where he alludes to the OVO situation with the line "I thank God that I never signed my life away." He also takes aim at Drake's associates with the line "They could never diss my brothers, baby/When they got leaks in they operation," and the particularly vicious bar "Their shooters making TikToks."

Travis Scott

Yet another rapper who's apparently chosen sides is Travis Scott, who appears on Future and Metro Boomin's project, though not overtly dissing Drake in his lyrics. One line from Drake's "Push Ups" that fans seem to believe is directed at Scott: "Rolling Loud stage, y'all were turnt, that was slick as hell/Shit'll probably change if your BM start to kiss and tell." It was Scott who hyped up the crowd at Rolling Loud in March as Metro and Future performed "Like That," and there's suspicion that the "BM" (short for baby mama) in question is Scott's ex Kylie Jenner.

Ja Morant

Among the more random responses on Drake's "Push Ups" is a reference to NBA star Ja Morant, the "hooper that be bustin' out the griddy," as Drake puts it. Apparently, Morant responded in affirmation to one of Metro Boomin's cryptic posts about picking a side, and Drake took notice. The source of the tension between the two appears to be Drake dating Morant's rumored ex, the model and influencer Johanna Leia.

Kanye West

Drake's longtime nemesis Kanye West joined in on the acrimony by jumping on a remix of "Like That." Their feud goes back to 2018, when Pusha T took shots at Drake on a West-produced beat, which led to Drake's "Duppy Freestyle," and ultimately to Pusha T's infamous "The Story of Adidon." The tension continued after West dropped "Lift Yourself," featuring a beat that Drake allegedly expressed interest in and that West decided to figuratively take a dump on. Internet rumors about Drake and Kim Kardashian, as well as West's appearances on podcasts and on social media, suggest the feud will continue for a while. ®

THE FIVE WILDEST RAP BEEFS OF ALL TIME

Before Drake vs. Everyone, these were hip-hop's craziest, silliest, and most tragic feuds

1 Jay-Z vs. Nas

After years of tension, the two New York kings traded personally insulting shots on 2001's "The Takeover" and "Ether." Years after they squashed the beef, the debate over who won rages on.

2 Tupac vs. Biggie

The most notable rap beef is also the saddest. It's the one that went too far, ending in two tragedies in 1996 and 1997, and setting a somber example of what can happen when bars turn into bullets.

3 50 Cent vs. Ja Rule

50 Cent feuded with practically every other rap star of his day — it was kind of his thing — but his funniest, most entertaining tiff was the one that ended Ja's early-2000s chart reign.

4 Jadakiss vs. Beanie Sigel

Most beefs are personal — this was sport. Beanie Sigel's "Kiss the Game Goodbye" and Jadakiss' "Fuck Beanie" freestyle remain underrated classics, full of witty digs.

5 N.W.A vs. Ice Cube

After N.W.A's principal songwriter walked away from the group's dubious contract, his former bandmates threw darts. Ice Cube returned fire with the brutal four-minute diss track "No Vaseline."

Jadakiss (left) and Sigel

Wonder 45 Soars with New Single 'Superman'

The track is off the London-based soul band's forthcoming debut album 'Wonderland'

WONDER 45'S NEW SINGLE "Superman" is a striking addition to their evolving repertoire, showcasing their dedication to authentic soul music while exploring a bluesy rock landscape. This London-based ensemble, originally an instrumental project helmed by producer and writer Holley Gray, has found its full expression through the collaborative efforts of guitarist Ross Ewart, drummer Chris Nickolls, and keys player Steve Pringle. The synergy of this group reaches new heights with the dynamic vocals of Jess Greenfield and Gavin Conder, whose harmonies as The Kondoors add a rich layer of sophistication to the track.

"Superman" is a masterclass in musical dynamics, effortlessly blending the earthy grit of blues with the driving force of rock. The song opens with a compelling drum groove from Nickolls that sets the tone for the entire piece, immediately grabbing the listener's attention. The bass lines are robust and grounding, providing a solid foundation for the intricate interplay between the instruments. Ewart's guitar work is both powerful and nuanced keeping the track tight and energetic. Steve Pringle's keys are a standout element, weaving through the track with a soulful grace that adds depth and texture.

At the heart of "Superman" are the vocals of Greenfield whose voice is a powerhouse, delivering the lyrics with a raw intensity that captures the essence of the song's themes. The backing vocals are crisp and well-arranged, creating a lush vocal landscape that enriches the song's overall sound.

The production quality of "Superman" is top-notch, a testament to Gray's skill behind the scenes. Each instrument is clear and distinct, yet they all blend seamlessly to create a cohesive and dynamic whole. The song's structure allows for plenty of ebb and flow, giving way to powerful crescendos that keep the listener engaged from start to finish.

Overall, "Superman" is a compelling track that highlights Wonder 45's ability to innovate within the soul genre while staying true to their roots. It's a bluesy rock anthem that not only showcases the individual talents of its members but also their ability to create something greater together. For fans of authentic, dynamic soul music with a modern twist, "Superman" is a must-listen. DAVID BRITTO

BLACKHAM IMAGES

Q&A

St. Vincent

The rock iconoclast on jamming with herself, co-writing Taylor Swift's "Cruel Summer," and the power of love

By BRIAN HIATT

"I've known I was going to make a record called *All Born Screaming* since I was 23," says St. Vincent. "But I just wasn't ready. I wasn't really worthy of the title, 'cause you have to live a lot to be worthy of a title that really says it all. It's the beauty, it's the brutality, and it's all part of the same continuum." St. Vincent's superb new album of that name is suffused with beauty and brutality in equal measure, with Nine Inch Nails-worthy noise bursts, some elegant crooning, and a few of her most streamlined hard-rock tracks ever, some assisted by Dave Grohl on drums. There are also a few entirely unexpected moments on the album, which is the first the artist, 41, has produced on her own, including the off-kilter dub reggae of "So Many Planets," which she spiced with a jazzy guitar solo meant to evoke Larry Carlton's playing with Steely Dan. "So much of making this record was, like, everything has to be tactile," she says. "It has to start with electricity and analog circuitry. It has to be touched."

This album seems a lot more direct and unguarded than your past work.

In past records, I've been very interested in the idea of persona and iconography. I realized I've done that in my work because I'm queer. I've known that gender is performance since I was a child. But this record isn't about persona or identity. It's just about, like, life and death and love, and how in some ways life is impossible but we get to live it. We've only got one of them, depending on your belief system. And the only thing worth living for, actually, is love. So much of modern society is designed to belittle us, to fracture us. At the risk of being kumbaya, it's radical to love thy neighbor. I'm not of a particular faith, but, like, we're all we got.

Ordinarily, I might say "Yeah, awesome" to an answer, but I don't want to underplay what you just said.

[*Laughs.*] No, that's OK. I read it off a meme, so don't worry.

These songs sound like they were created by jamming with a band, but you actually did it on your own, with musicians added later. What's your secret to that?

I've got a mixer set up with three drum machines, two synths. This was my way of setting up all my machines and jamming with myself for hours and hours. Even if I only used four seconds, it was all worth it. Then you have to go back and go, "But what about songs?" All of the sounds have to serve the song. I could do this for hours, but what's your heart saying? "That's cute. That's clever. Go deeper. Really look in the mirror, really reckon with all this." And because I produced it alone, there are certain songs I sang a hundred times. It wasn't about "I need to make this a perfect performance." It was almost like what you hear David Fincher does to actors.

Now that you have a great song called "Flea" with Dave Grohl on it, aren't you pretty much obligated to write an equally good song called "Dave Grohl" and get Flea to play on it?

Absolutely. That is next on the list. Yeah, absolutely. I played some shows with the Chili Peppers not too long ago, which was so fun. And I love Flea. He's a great dude. Great bass player.

You must have known that you were in for comments like that when you recorded a song called "Flea."

I contemplated calling the song "Fleas," but I don't sing "fleas." Again, you know, serve the song and then deal with the aftermath later.

Would you mind explaining the full story of your involvement with Taylor Swift's "Cruel Summer"?

I don't mind people asking me about the song. I know it's a ripper of a song. And I am so amazed at Taylor's fans because they took a song that was from many records ago and they were like, "No, this is a hit." And they marched it up the charts and made it a worldwide hit. I'm just, like, God bless her fans. That's the coolest thing. I've never seen anything like it, really. Yeah, "Cruel Summer" was a track I worked on with Jack [Antonoff], and it found its way to Taylor, and she wrote it.

When you made the instrumental track originally, what did you think it was going to be?

Oh, I didn't know. We were just having fun and just making music.

I'm a fan of *Nowhere Inn,* your 2021 movie with Carrie Brownstein.

Oh, you're one of five [*laughs*]. Usually when musicians make documentaries, it's more or less a marketing tool. We just took all the tropes of the classic musician documentary and did them wrong. I think what Carrie and I were trying to say is that all of this authenticity that gets peddled to us is total artifice. So what if we actually manufactured it, knowing that? But also, people like a story and people like a hero, and [the idea was] what if I made myself so incredibly unlikable? And that's why no one liked it! [*Laughs.*]

Is there an artist you'd like to play in a biopic?

It's an interesting genre [but] it's not a genre I peddle in. Unless you do a Todd Haynes Bob Dylan. That's the way to do it. I just can't suspend my disbelief when there's a scene where, like, someone starts playing a thing, and then the drummer's like, "Hey, that's pretty cool" — and the mics are turned the wrong fucking way. I can't suspend my disbelief. I just can't. ®

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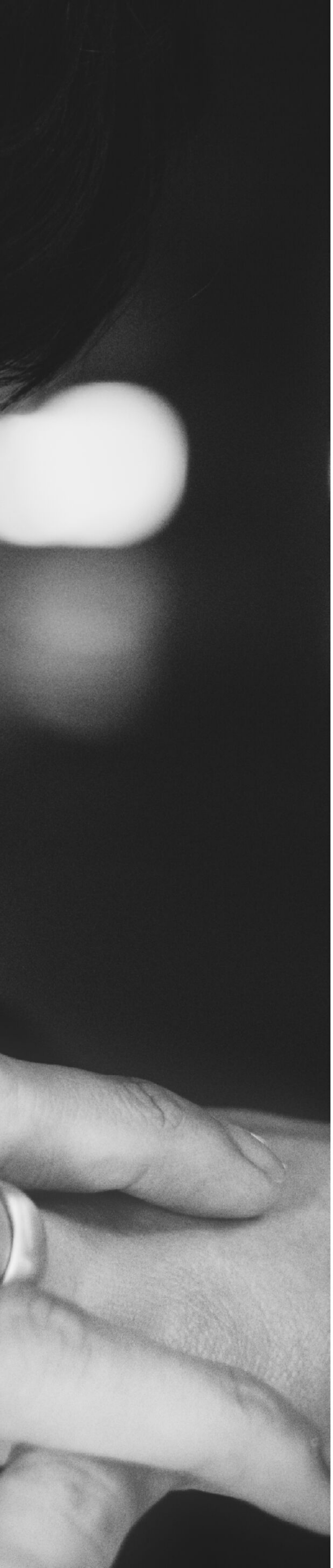


‘A New Beginning’: Inside Kim Woo-jin’s ‘I Like the Way’

Taking a decisive part in its song selection, mood direction, and composition, Woojin is sharing how he has evolved with the world through this album

Kim Woo-jin stands as a model of resolve, resilience, and artistic transformation. Emerging onto the music scene as Woojin, he had an uphill climb through unforeseen situations. Fortunately, his undying love and commitment to his craft helped him navigate all aspects of the industry, the minefields of social media, and public scrutiny while forging a career that speaks to the heart of his audience.

Channeling those experiences and his emotions into his music, Woojin’s songs have become an outlet for sharing his struggles, setbacks, triumphs, and a transformative journey he’s been through—also, one for the listeners to find solace in his honest and emotive performances. *I Like the Way*, Woojin’s latest third mini-album manifests his transformation, inherently his musical metamorphosis, unveiling a new chapter as a solo artist that effectively translates his voice into stories through music—one geared towards catharsis. “For this album, I tried to tell my story more confidently and honestly than before,” he says. “I worked with the hope that everyone who listens to my music will receive happiness and comfort.”

Should you be unaware, Woojin’s ascent to fame started as a Stray Kids member in 2017. But he left the band after two years over personal issues, signing with 10x Entertainment in 2020 as a soloist. During the switch, he became the brunt of online harassment, enduring the ill effects of claims, and speculations, before finally coming clean in mid-2021. Woojin highlights in *I Like the Way* past events: “I felt that I had to convey my thoughts and intentions as I started my solo career and went through a lot.” “This record could be considered a psychological reflection of mine.”

It marks the outset of what’s to come. Taking a decisive part in its song selection, mood direction, and composition, Woojin is sharing how he has evolved with the world. The album’s five tracks, including the title song “I Like the Way,” showcase an eclectic mix of musical genres spanning pop, R&B, Afrobeat, and ballads. Together, they create this passionate musical story that the album’s title alludes to. “In a literal sense, it means that I like the way I do it, carrying a firm will to get through it my way no matter what people around me say,” he explains.

“I think a good album gives comfort and happiness to those who listen to it. If someone felt comfortable and happy after hearing my album, I think it could be a good album.”

Woojin has often gravitated towards emotionally charged R&B tunes. “R&B was a genre that I liked and practiced a lot since I was young, so I didn’t have much difficulty.” It finds a vivid expression in “Pretty Mess,” a dynamic R&B number fusing a synth bass melody with a pluck sound that evokes his confidence in staying true to himself notwithstanding challenges. The artist also dabbled with new sounds, such as the Afro genre, on “What U Say,” a dance single with Afrobeat and pop ingredients. “While learning Afro-dance, I worked hard with a sense of challenge, and the result was satisfactory,” he recalls. Its words encapsulate the rush of falling in love in a distinctive arrangement, with a two-way chorus melody building the attractiveness.

The other two tracks from the release, “Hold” and “To. My Friend,” are distinct pop songs. “Hold” is a pop ballad of complex emotions through Woojin’s expressive vocals within a gentle piano melody that underscores his story. “To. My Friend” is pop R&B music with an acoustic guitar sound and a subtle emotional melody reflecting his longing for a childhood friend. It’s Woojin’s favorite song off the record as well. ““To. My Friend’ describes my narrative. I wanted to remember and keep my friend in my heart, writing down words I couldn’t say while missing my friend who passed away.”

I Like the Way it feels like Woojin walking down an avenue to strengthen his relationship with his art and audience. His road to success has been a rite of passage, not merely a series of victories and turning points. Through every disappointment and accomplishment, he has matured into the artist he is today. In his words, “There is a video called ‘Rebirth’ in the teaser video of this album, and like the word, this will be the first album revealing Kim Woo-jin’s more sincere story, multiple challenges, attempts, and a new beginning.”

When asked if he considers this one a good album, he says, ““Good’ has a wide range of meanings, so I think it depends on the way you look at it. I think a good album gives comfort and happiness to those who listen to it. If someone felt comfortable and happy after hearing my album, I think it could be a good album.”

Wrapping up, he mentions his will to never stop testing himself, going above and beyond what’s possible, with a bigger goal in mind, his dream: “to make the world brighter and happier with my music.” **DEBASHREE DUTTA**

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

K-Drama Flashback: 'Love in the Moonlight'

'Love in the Moonlight' is a moment to remember in its heartfelt and lighter episodes that segue between profound emotional punches and fun moments in flawless unity

I GIVE ALL THE BROWNIE POINTS TO *LOVE IN THE MOONLIGHT* for being exactly what it is: a timeless classic K-drama that looks into the intersection of culture and society while placing an improbable love story at the forefront of the fascinating dynamics of palace life during the Joseon dynasty. We follow the ascent to prominence of Crown Prince Lee Yeong (Park Bo-gum) and the bond he shares with Eunuch Hong Ra-on (Kim Yoo-jung)—an emotional roller coaster of love, laughter, loyalty, friendship, sacrifice, and suffering through tense moments brought on by political intrigue.

Here's how it all begins: Lee Yeong decides to meet the writer of the love letters his sister (the princess) is receiving. Interestingly, Ra-on, a romance novelist and love counselor, has been drafting them under the alias Hong Sam-nom. Dressed as a man, she always hides her reality. One day when summoned to meet the princess she's caught off guard, seeing the Crown Prince there (who's also in disguise). The encounter leads to something of an initial hostility between them, and shortly thereafter, her creditors sell her as a eunuch to the palace. In how and what ensues, Lee Yong and Ra-on fall for each other.

As much as Kim Yoo-jung's exquisite expressiveness vividly conveys the essence of Ra-on's character on screen, Park Bo-gum is remarkably adept at expressing the subtleties of Lee Yong's emotions. Their love story is an odyssey of significance cutting

In its detailed description of a time in Joseon, *Love in the Moonlight* invites us to reflect on the flow of time and many universal values. Immersing your senses in an age that feels both foreign and familiar, the elaborate setting, complex court politics, and social mores of the era enhance an already rich drama.

COURTESY OF KBS

beyond class, stigma, and prejudices—one of the best historical K-dramas in my book, intuitively presenting its take on the fundamentals of self-growth and the specifics of interpersonal interactions.

In its detailed description of a time in Joseon, *Love in the Moonlight* invites us to reflect on the flow of time and many universal values. Immersing your senses in an age that feels both foreign and familiar, the elaborate setting, complex court politics, and social mores of the era enhance an already rich drama. You're given an insight into the intricate power structures and social hierarchies that influence the lives of those living within the royal walls. The characters' intricate interactions—each with their backstories, hardships, and moments of personal development—help to personalize the historical setting and make it relatable to viewers today.

Love in the Moonlight is a moment to remember in its heartfelt and lighter episodes that segue between profound emotional punches and fun moments in flawless unity. Along with its leads, the other main characters are just as beautiful—particularly the rich, magnetic scholar Kim Yoon-sung (Jung Jin-young), who becomes Ra-on's confidant from the start, figuring out her truth, and Kim

Byung-yeon (Kwak Dong-yeon), an expert swordsman and scholar, the Head of the Royal Guard of the Crown Prince's palace and his trusted friend.

But I'll bring up Park Bo-geum once more. His rendition of the endearing and multifaceted Crown Prince is a favorite for the way he manages deep within his burgeoning feelings for Ra-on while cognizant of the gravity and the technicalities of who he is. Their on-screen rapport is the cornerstone of what made *Love in the Moonlight* a phenomenon, sparking the "Moonlight Syndrome" throughout and following its run in 2016.

The coming-of-age drama premised on the 19th-century Joseon Dynasty, originates from the web novel *Moonlight Drawn by Clouds* and comes into being through its production details, staying true to and recreating the period's physical surroundings. From the royal interiors to the streets, the setting of daily business, the clothing, and the sight of people clad in vibrant, billowing hanboks, the entirety captures the spirit of the time.

Its' warm palette adds to the overall classic quaint ambiance underlining the cinematographic appeal thanks to the ambient lighting and thoughtfully used mix-and-match textures across multiple scenes. Into the bargain, its amazing OST complements the story enriching the viewing experience. With everything falling into place, *Love in the Moonlight* is an epic tale of romance, humor, and politics that ably and aesthetically reflects Korean culture breaking down boundaries across cultures, and bringing people together via the shared language of storytelling. **DEBASHREE DUTTA**

COURTESY OF IMDB; FESTIVAL DE CANNES

‘Painted Fire’: A Trailblazer in Korean Cinema

‘Painted Fire’ draws on the existence of the celebrated and fiercely passionate painter Jang Seung-up, who revolutionized Korean art during the 19th century

PAINTED FIRE BECAME A trailblazer in Korean cinema to be awarded the prestigious Palme d’Or at the 55th Cannes Film Festival.

A cinematic masterpiece, *Painted Fire* stands as a testament to Korean filmmaking’s artistic legacy through the decades. *Painted Fire*—the English for *Chihwaseon*—became the first Korean movie to win the Cannes Film Festival in 2002, a watershed moment for Korean cinema. Directed by the venerated Im Kwon-taek, it captured international attention, leaving an indelible impression on the South Korean cultural landscape. Its big victory at Cannes that year, when Im won Best Director with Paul Thomas Anderson for *Punch-Drunk Love*, not only spotlights his ingenuity as a filmmaker but also speaks for Korean cinema’s expanding audience and rising profile.

Painted Fire, Im’s 98th film, draws on the existence of the celebrated and fiercely passionate painter Jang Seung-up, famous as Oh-won (Choi Min-sik), who revolutionized Korean art during the 19th century. A reputable but self-destructive individual, he supposedly went missing and was presumed dead. The film’s impact goes well beyond its momentous Cannes win, as it captures the complicated dynamics and challenges of a stormy chapter in Korean history and its effects on the Korean way of life, as seen through Jang Seong-up’s narrative.

It opens to Jang being wary of someone in love with his creations. In flashback, his upbringing emerges—raised as an orphan, he’s a wandering bohemian soul with an innate ability to draw. In a bid to forge a painting style of his own, Jang endures mockery, setbacks, and hardships. He’s also self-absorbed, often wasted, and severely harsh. Later in what happens, he becomes an artist, valuing art over money to the point where, after failing an assignment for a painting the king had given him, he leaves the palace, forfeiting his job as a royal painter, melting into thin air in 1897. *Painted Fire*’s deeper context of bias in society and class barriers successfully channels Jang’s feelings of abandonment.

Director Im Kwon-taek, a veteran of Korean cinema, is revered for his

Painted Fire explores how its visuals, the Korean countryside, cultural allusions, and paintings by Jang Seung-up come together to create works of art while also illuminating the innermost thoughts of a gifted artist and his identity crisis amid Korea's reform movement, torn between China and Japan.

extensive and rich professional trajectory alongside his concentrated work on Korean society. He's also known for articulating his personal experiences together with the emotions and mental images that come from them, as apparent in *Painted Fire*.

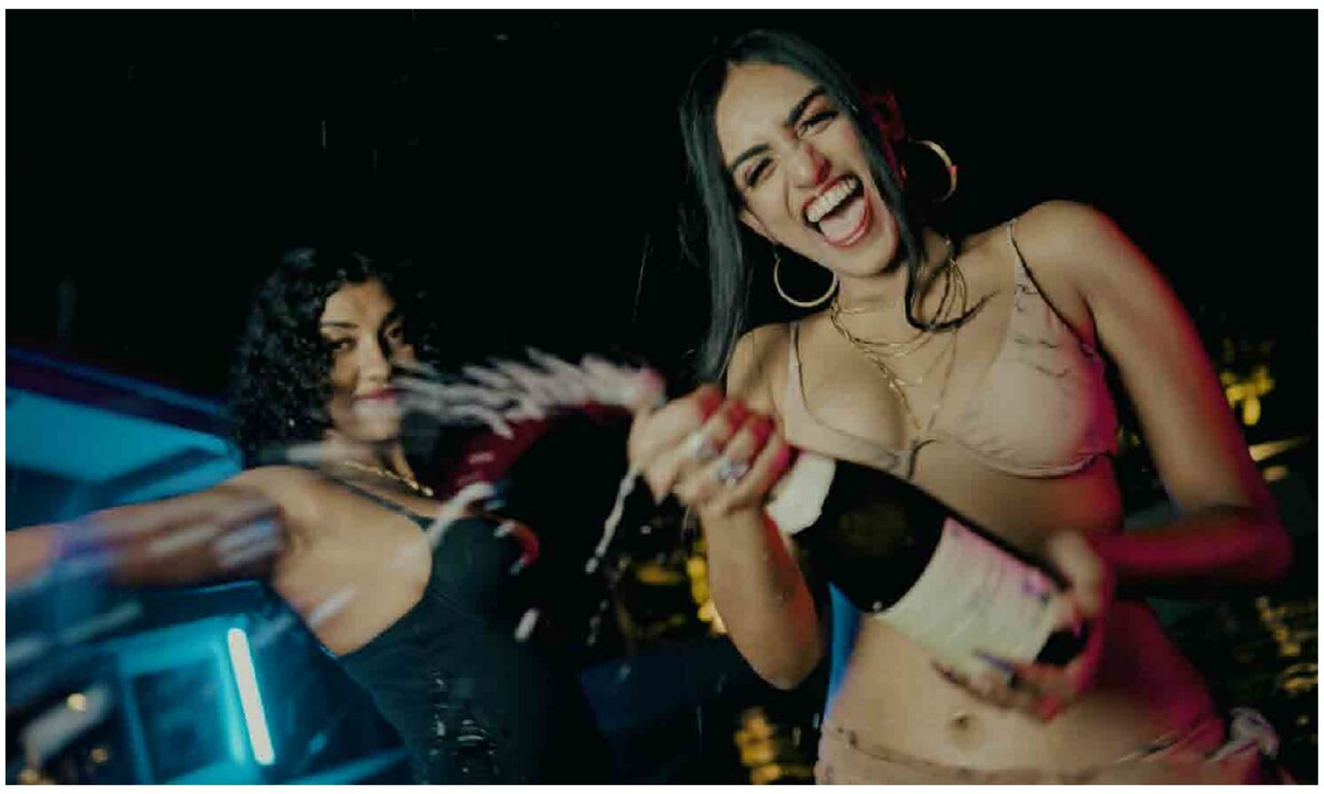
Back in 2002, at the official press conference of the 55th Cannes Film Festival, Im commented on the parallels he had drawn between himself and Jang Seung-up. "This painter began his career at the age of approximately 20, and he had a long career because he died when he was 54, and I began my career at the age of about 20, and I survived." Subsequently, "he married when he was about 40; this is my case too," and third, "he was fond of drinking, and I too went through a period when I was better known perhaps as an alcoholic than as a director," Im added. Besides, "Jang Seung-up liked beautiful women; he liked having women around him when he was painting, and I too loved making films with beautiful women," he said, reiterating his admiration for women, beautiful or not, and thus, from such viewpoints, "though we are not working in the same profession, we no doubt share similar experiences," noted the filmmaker.

Painted Fire explores how its visuals, the Korean countryside, cultural allusions, and paintings by Jang Seung-up come together to create works of art while also illuminating the innermost thoughts of a gifted artist and his identity crisis amid Korea's reform movement, torn between China and Japan. **DEBASHREE DUTTA**

FRESH INDIE PICKS

Check out new releases from independent acts

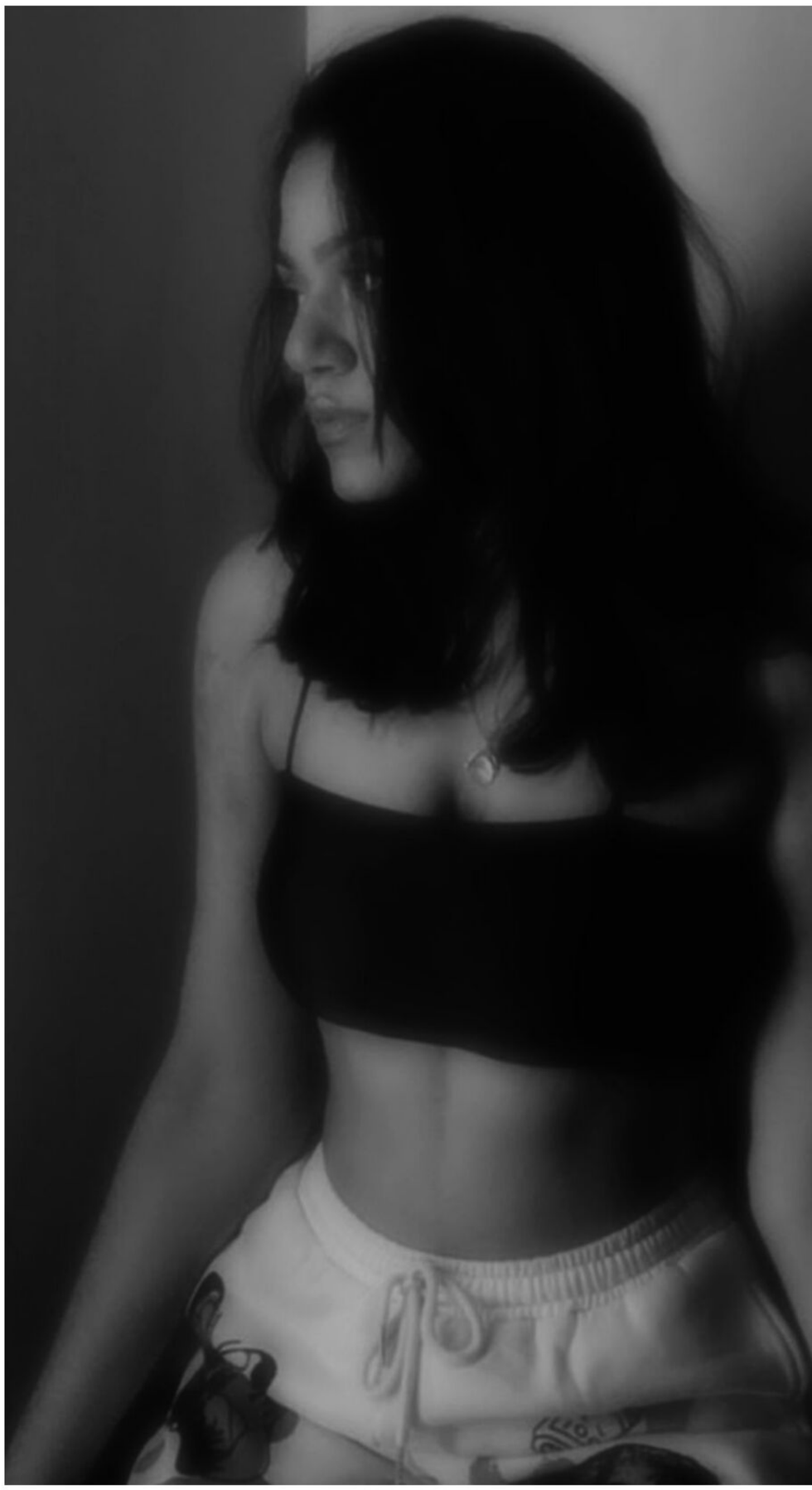
By David Britto



Shia, Irfana, Zero Chill – *"Stunnin"*

The new track "Stunnin" is a powerful drill rap anthem from hip-hop artists Shia and Irfana. The track, produced by Mumbai-based Zero Chill, exudes confidence and delves into themes of success, empowerment and sexuality. Shia and Irfana assert their dominance with rapid-fire verses packed with punchlines and attitude. The song's dynamic flows and bold lyrics make "Stunnin" a fierce celebration of self-assurance and unapologetic pride. In a statement, the artists said, "The [music] video's unapologetic embrace of sensuality and confidence sends a powerful message that women can assert their sexuality on their own terms, without being objectified or exploited for the male gaze."

COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS



Punya – *"Chal Gale Lag"*

Mumbai-based singer-songwriter Punya's new poignant song "Chal Gale Lag" goes beyond music to offer a heartfelt plea for connection and belonging. This evocative song captures the profound sense of missing loved ones when relocating to a new place. It articulates the universal longing for familiar people and places that define us, particularly amidst the uncertainties of change and distance. "Chal Gale Lag" serves as a poignant reminder of how deeply we miss our close ones. In a statement, Punya said, "The feeling of missing the people and places that shaped us is universal and nothing really replaces the warmth of a hug."

Yohan Marshall, Mali – *"Just For Once"*

"Just For Once" by Mumbai-based artists Yohan Marshall and Mali is a cinematic-pop anthem that fuses acoustic singer-songwriter elements with majestic orchestral arrangements. The song serves as a comforting companion, addressing themes of overcoming adversity and dismantling limiting beliefs. Its rich, melodic composition conveys a straightforward message of hope, motivating listeners to realize their full potential.

Shreya Jain — *"Na Rahi.."*

Mumbai-based singer-songwriter Shreya Jain's latest acoustic offering "Na Rahi.." is a delicate anthem for those who have endured the pain of a failed relationship but emerged stronger and more grateful. In a statement, Jain said, "It's a celebration of self-discovery, empowerment and the courage to let go of what no longer serves one's happiness."

CONTRA — *"Rain"*

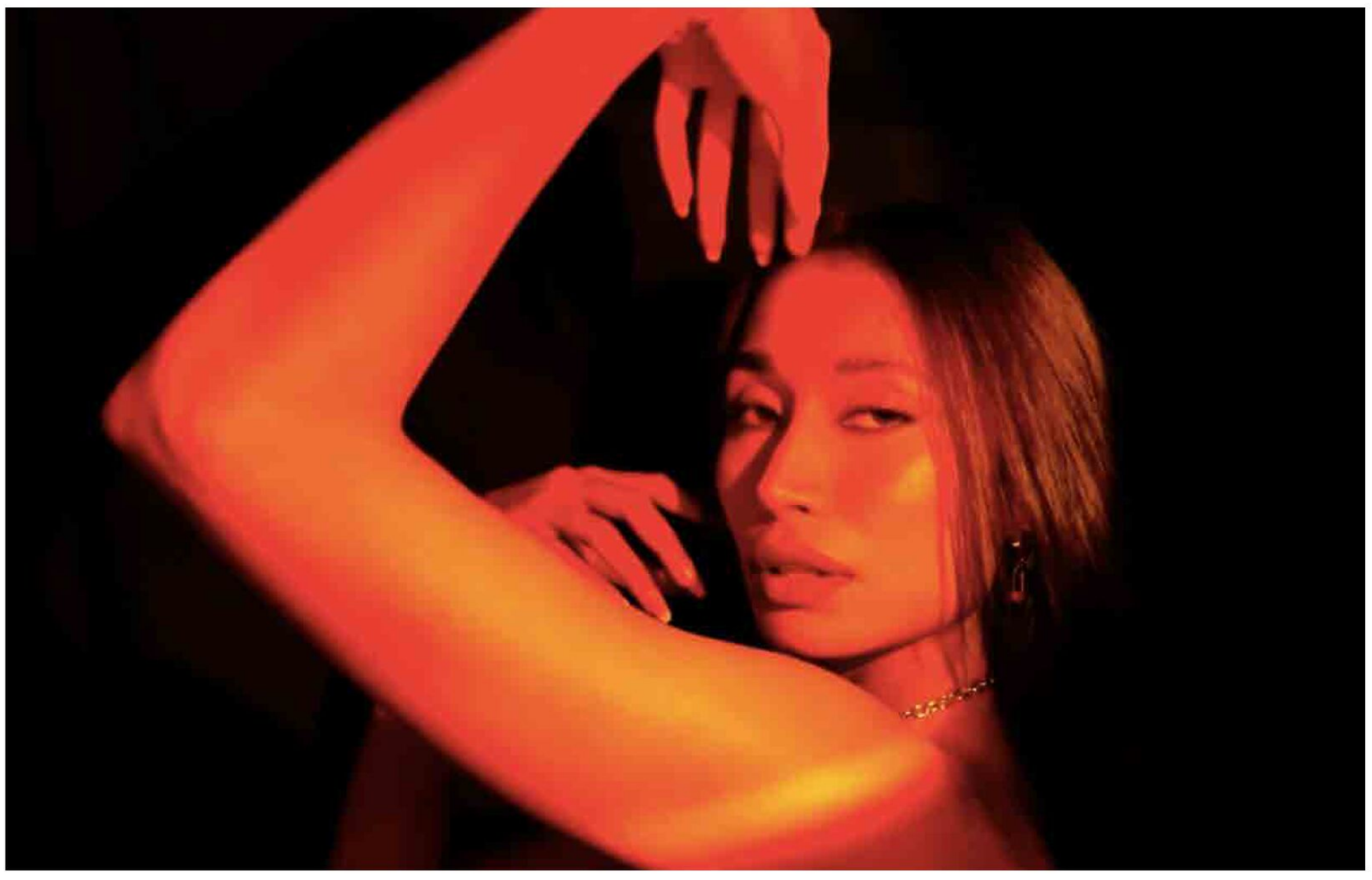
Mumbai-based rock outfit CONTRA storms onto the indie scene with their debut single "Rain," a haunting exploration of emotional numbness and desolation. Produced by Siddharth Basrur, the song's heavy grunge sound plunges listeners into darkness, culminating in the chorus "colors I feel no more" echoing desperation. Vocalist Manas Jha describes it as a visceral journey through grief, where even the simplest pleasures fade into oblivion. CONTRA sets the stage for their upcoming EP. Accompanied by a powerful music video, "Rain" delves into the protagonist's inner conflict, urging a confrontation with inner demons.

Biancca, Suyash – *"Din Raat / Off My Mind"*

"Din Raat / Off My Mind" is a vibrant pop/funk, disco fusion crafted by Mumbai singer Biancca and Chennai producer Suyash. Exploring the exhilarating rush of initial attraction, the song captivates with its catchy hooks and dancey beats. Biancca's lyrical prowess shines as she delves into the complexities of infatuation, while Suyash's production infuses the track with funky guitars and infectious rhythms.

Kay — *"Russia"*

"Russia" by Kanishka Lohar aka Kay, unveils a mesmerizing sonic journey that transcends boundaries. Mumbai-bred and New York-based KAY's latest creation captivates with its enigmatic lyrics and infectious melody. Delving into realms of imagination and inevitability, "Russia" beckons listeners with its thought-provoking narrative. For Kay, each composition is a vivid painting, a convergence of emotions and experiences. With "Russia," she invites audiences to dance to its pulsating rhythm while pondering its deeper meanings.



Shama — *Blowing Sage*

Mumbai-based singer-songwriter Shama unveils her five-track debut EP Blowing Sage. Mastering beats on digital audio workstation Logic, she blends genres, reflecting her diverse influences. Shama's music draws influence from artists such as Erykah Badu and SZA. Thematically, the EP delves into post-breakup clarity with tracks like "E D R" and "4U," blending soulful harmonies with bold lyricism over chill pop/R&B beats.

Saadhya — *"self imposed sadness"*

Mumbai-based 16-year-old singer-songwriter Saadhya Madiman – who goes by her first name — captivates with her just-released debut single "self imposed sadness." Infused with raw emotion, the song delves into the complexities of feeling trapped in life's struggles, grappling with both physical and emotional pain. Saadhya's acoustic-focused style, influenced by rock, pop, jazz, and indie, lends authenticity to her introspective lyrics. With a mature perspective on themes like love, heartbreak, and self-discovery, she offers listeners a glimpse into the beautiful yet tumultuous journey of youth.

VIDYA VOX'S 'SUNDARI' BRINGS PERSONAL STORIES AND CELEBRATORY BOPS

THE INDO-AMERICAN ARTIST RAPS AND SINGS IN TAMIL AND MALAYALAM, WITH THE MUSIC VIDEO OUT NOW FOR THE TITLE TRACK OFF THE EP

By **Anurag Tagat**

RECLIPSE PHOTOGRAPHY

In December 2019, pop artist Vidya Vox aka Vidya Iyer went to a friend's *sangeet* ceremony and says it was a sight to behold. Vidya says over a video call, "I was looking around at all the women there and how everyone was in beautiful outfits. I knew all of them and how they were all strong and leaders in their own communities and also very good at their craft and their jobs and also moms – they all play these multifaceted roles in their lives and they all looked fabulous."

They were there and dancing away, a celebratory essence that Vidya felt fit to distill into a song and that's how "Champagne Roses" came about. Produced by Shankar Tucker, the hip-hop leaning song references everything from "Kala Chashma" to the Bollywood movie *Rangeela*, driven by a thumping beat. It also served as the first thread that led to Vidya creating her latest EP *Sundari*, which released last week with a music video for the title track.

There's a thematic continuity in terms of where *Sundari* fits into the "Kuthu Fire" artist's discography – empowered by inspirational woman and aiming to inspire other women through club-friendly songs that borrow from Vidya's Carnatic music roots as well as her love for pop, hip-hop, Bollywood and Indian folk music. But Vidya made *Sundari* EP specifically as an ode to her mother, who took Vidya and her sister out of an abusive marriage and household to raise them, perhaps passing on lessons of self-love and resilience. That forms the crux of the six-track EP, which starts with the impassioned "Stardust" that's arguably the artist's most pensive song yet, followed by a switch back into familiar settings with songs like "Sundari," the Malayalam bop "Ini Ninte Lokam (Go Off)" and "Dangerous" with singer-composer Nikhita Gandhi. *Sundari* EP closes with another collaboration, bringing in vocalist Rohith Jayaraman for the rap-laced "Yazhiha."

In an interview with *Rollin Stone India*, Vidya talks about the making of *Sundari* EP, what her mom thinks about the songs and her changing relationship with music videos at a time when social media algorithms have completely transformed consumption. Excerpts:

Rolling Stone India: **You've said this is a deeply personal record. Were there some things you wanted to hold closer until you found the right time or expression for it to release?**

Vidya Vox: 100 percent. I haven't been as open about my childhood in the past, and I felt like all [of my] music, while it feels personal, it [also] felt a little bit surface level, if I'm being completely honest.

I was not fully digging in deep because I was scared to be a little vulnerable with my music. I was scared to be talking about some of the painful past and using that in the studio to make music with it. I feel like I was avoiding it a little bit. I'm kind of in my healing journey now, and I'm in therapy, and just being in touch with and reconciling with some of my past, I think, has

MAYA IMAN

brought out a different side of me, and I've been ready to be vulnerable with this music.

That's why it's also taken so long – because I wanted to make sure the instrumentation, the production, the atmosphere of all the songs really reflected some of the lyrics. I worked with [lyricist] Madhan Karky on it because I also wanted it to be in Tamil, which is my mother tongue. In a way, that's also very personal.

I had an abusive father growing up and we had to run away from home and just seeing my mom take control of the situation and be brave about it and love herself enough to leave a violent situation where it ultimately helped my sister and I also escape the violent situation was something that I haven't really thought about much. My brain has blocked it. My brain's like, 'I can't talk about it. I can't think about it.'

The EP opens with "Stardust" which feels like an unconventional choice for a first track, considering people often want a banger to draw listeners into the rest. Was it intentional to have this esoteric kind of song open the EP?
It's totally intentional. I wanted a song to open with just a cinematic-ish [song], with strings that build throughout the EP, and about a piece that talked about self-love. Madhan Karky had written some of these lyrics, which I read and I was like, 'Oh, this is the song I was looking for.'

I composed the whole tune, and Shankar [Tucker] wrote the string arrangements for it. We recorded live string players here, and seeing it all come together, it felt like the right choice [to become the EP's opening track]. Some of the other songs are saucy, you know? The whole point was that there's different facets of women as women. We're all these different things, and how do you capture what a woman is?

My attempt was to show, 'Here is this person who loves herself and who's only reliant on herself, who's independent, but also it spreads to other people.' Then there's 'Dangerous,' it's a little saucy. 'Yazhiha' is about an angel who's helping everybody, but also, if you try to play with her, she'll get you.

There's a lot of stuff happening sonically on 'Sundari' and 'Ini Ninte Lokam (Go Off).' How did those two songs come about?
'Sundari' is based in a little bit of an afro beat vibe. The image that I had was a bunch of aunties at weddings in their saris, drinks in their hand and they're partying. They're confident in themselves and it's a little bit sexy.

I feel like [in] so much of society, women are just completely sexualized, and we're only taken at face value. I wanted to reiterate, yes, while we're sexy and beautiful, underneath it all, we are strong and empowered and can take anybody on. I wanted it to be something that people can dance to but at the same time, I didn't want to forget the essence of the EP and the essence of where it came from.

My mom loves dance parties. When we would have had a really hard day or we'd had to do a lot of things in court for the first few years and we were fighting a lot of things, my mom would come home and just put on some music and have a dance party with us, and I wanted to capture all of that. It's like she had this hard, crazy hard day fighting this predator and then comes home and is able to have this dance party. I thought that was so beautiful.

'Ini Ninte Lokam' is Malayalam. My family's from Palakkad. I grew up hearing Malayalam. I don't personally speak it, but I understand it and I can make my way around Kerala if I needed to. The song was about saying it's your world and there's no boundaries and no limits to what you can do and accomplish. It has similar themes of the empowering resilience and it all stems from my mom.

What did your mom think of the EP? Have you made her listen to it?
[*Laughs*]She's heard it in every iteration. I've had a few different iterations that I've played for her, and the final iteration, she's literally listened to it on loop. She's like, "Sundari' is one of my favorites.' 'Stardust' and 'Champagne Roses,' she says she's just been looping those over and over, and I think it's because it personally connects with her. She loves it.

She's a little shy that it was inspired by her. I think it made her a little bit emotional when I told her, 'cause I wanted to tell her at the end, I didn't actually tell her when I was making the record. I was like, 'I'm just gonna tell her at the end.' And it made her pretty emotional. It was a really sweet moment, and she's been my supporter since day one, so it was really sweet. She loves it, and she's always dancing. [laughs] If I call her, she'll be like, [*imitates dancing to 'Sundari'*].

"I FEEL LIKE [IN] SO MUCH OF SOCIETY, WOMEN ARE JUST COMPLETELY SEXUALIZED, AND WE'RE ONLY TAKEN AT FACE VALUE. I WANTED TO REITERATE, YES, WHILE WE'RE SEXY AND BEAUTIFUL, UNDERNEATH IT ALL, WE ARE STRONG AND EMPOWERED AND CAN TAKE ANYBODY ON."

You had the music video for 'Sundari' come out. Do you have a video for every song on this EP?
The video for 'Dangerous' has been shot, the one I did with Nikhita Gandhi. So we shot that a couple of years ago now. We're just in the grading process of that – it's just both of us having fun and looking cool. We shot it at a set here in L.A., and then 'Champagne Roses,' we shot it in India, in Jaipur. The inspiration behind that was just to have a bunch of ladies having a good time. We shot it in a palace and it looks cool. Then 'Stardust' is very, very cinematic. It's just me outside, running around. It's all also done on, like, a very shoestring budget because we're independent musicians and we're really funding this all of ourselves, so we have to do a lot with a little.

'Ini Ninte Lokam' is gonna be a studio-style video because I wanted the string players to be in it as well since they played on it. The videos are a little bit fun, and I would love for my mom to be in some of the videos, but she lives across the country, so that's a little bit hard to do. But that's basically the plan.

Vidya Vox channels hip-hop, pop and Carnatic fusion on Sundari EP, created as an ode to her mother. Photo: Maya Iman

You've always paid importance to videos as a YouTuber. There have been so many grouses about changing algorithms on YouTube and Instagram. What has it been like to constantly engage with it?
Yeah, I'm tired thinking about it. You have to constantly reinvent your strategy, your content, yourself. The root for all of my video-making is to direct people back to my music. I think at the base of it all, I am an artist, I want people to listen to my music.

So in some ways, I have to play the game of what is going to engage people the most in my profile to then go listen to my music. That was also the reason I started with mashup covers, because I was like, 'Okay, I need to start building a little bit of a base of some following. So then when I release my original music, there are people that will listen to [it].'

It has changed a lot since the pandemic. I think people's attention span is much shorter. You need to get people in the first three seconds of a video. That sometimes drives me crazy. So I try to play into that sometimes, but other times I'm just like, you know what? You can't. People who are gonna find you will find you. I get down by it a little bit, honestly, because the people who are actually following me never see my posts. It's always gonna be new people. It's always gonna be people that the algorithm is trying to reach.

I had to also keep that in mind going into some of these shoots because I'm like, 'I've shot this full music video, but wait, I have to shoot a 10-second snippet or something that's gonna grab people's attention.' It's hard. I don't have all the answers.

Are there any potential shows or tours planned to promote *Sundari* in India?
Yeah, I'm hoping that we'll do some shows in the Fall to promote the EP. Hopefully we can do an India trip and do little release parties and sessions. ®

THE NONSTOP HUSTLE OF CARDI B

Amid the pressures of celebrity and motherhood, she's on a mission to prove her greatness

By Mankaprr Conteh
Photography by Adrienne Raquel

THE NONSTOP HUSTLE OF CARDI B

CARDI B IS MAKEUP-FREE

and draped in an orange, impossibly plush, queen-size blanket as she shuffles into Glenwood Place Studios in Burbank, California, around nine o'clock one evening in mid-March. Whatever hairstyle she currently has (knowing Cardi, it could be anything from a wig worth thousands to her fluffy, waist-length natural hair) is tucked under a giant bonnet, its magenta-and-teal geometric print immediately familiar from videos she's posted on TikTok.

Cardi, who's been handling phone calls and other tasks since 9 a.m., is feeling drained. She's here to work on her upcoming album, due later this year. Tonight, she's also tasked with what she calls "aggressive promotion" for a new single, "Enough (Miami)." "Right now, I'm getting cursed out because I was supposed to be on Stationhead," she says, referring to the livestreaming app on which she is expected to be interacting with her fans (stan army name: BardiGang). "I got 3,000 fans like, 'The bitch ...'" she growls, mimicking the fury she suspects is brewing.

Cardi isn't the only star at work in the building tonight. Lizzo pops into Cardi's room to say hello. "Look at you!" she coos, hugging Cardi. "You look like a little angel. I love you." She jokingly encourages Cardi to promote the clothes her shapewear brand Yitty sent Cardi's way ("Post and tag!") before announcing that she's off to "get some dick."

"Lucky you," says Cardi. "Lucky, lucky you."

Cardi needs coffee. When it arrives, she tears open several — like, *several* — packets of sugar and dumps them into her mug, along with some cream. Despite her visceral fatigue, it doesn't take long for her to animate. When she cracks jokes or speaks hyperbolically, there is an undercurrent of laughter that gurgles in her throat but doesn't always break, like a stand-up who knows not to spend too much time giggling at herself.

"I could drink a dark coffee," she says. "But only my family could make a dark coffee I could drink."

"Is it a different type of coffee?" I ask.

"No, but they make it with love," she says, shrinking into a petite, Disney-princess swoon. (Her longtime recording engineer Evan LaRay Brunson tells me her family makes their coffee with brown sugar.)

It's easy to forget that the 31-year-old superstar born Belcalis Marlenis Almánzar is only one album deep — one record-breaking, Grammy-winning, culture-shifting album, but one nonetheless. In 2018, *Invasion of Privacy* shot Cardi from Instagram theatrics and reality-show shenanigans into the stratosphere. Just three years prior, she was stripping. Coming on the heels of "Bodak Yellow," one of the most important songs in the history of New York rap, the album's emotional range and tight execution helped usher in an era in which all kinds of women in hip-hop have broken through and thrived. "These labels was not believing in repping new rap artists," Cardi says. "People from every single label have fucking told me this shit in my face. They started signing new female rappers after I got signed. Whether some bitches could be the greatest rappers [or] they just make good music — at the end of the fucking day, guess what? They're in your playlist right now."

Along the way, Cardi became a mother two times over without losing herself in the role. Instead, she amped up every part of her being, including her sexuality, making her film debut in Jennifer Lopez's stripper-heist *Hustlers* and recording history's greatest ode to the vagina, 2020's "WAP," with Megan Thee Stallion. She became the only woman in hip-hop with multiple billion-stream songs on Spotify. And she went on a historic feature run, lending her bold personality to rap newcomers like GloRilla, R&B singers like Summer Walker, and Latin stars like Shakira.

Despite those accomplishments, the prospect of a follow-up to *Invasion of Privacy* always loomed over Cardi; she's proclaimed that her sophomore album was coming nearly every year since her first. She worried: *Could she match her previous success? Did she have the right songs?* In February, her husband and fellow rapper Offset put it to her plainly: "Stop being scary and drop the album, shit goes crazy."

On this March night in Los Angeles, there's a lot left to do: It needs an intro and at least three more songs. It needs a title, it needs features, and it needs a rollout plan. "Being out here is my punishment," she says. "Until I have the album ready, I'm not going home."

Having spent the past three months recording in L.A. and Miami, cities that are functionally office buildings for her, Cardi is homesick for her bustling mansion just outside of her hometown of New York. "When I come to L.A., I be like, 'I'm ready to get shit done,'" she says. "Then, eight days in, my mind starts missing home, feeling lonely, and then I be like, 'Girl ... '" — as if confronting herself — "I miss my kids."

Brunson, who has been by her side since 2016, says making music involves a "roller coaster of emotions" for Cardi. "When we good, we knocking them out. Verse after verse, hook, ad-libs. I'm like, 'You're done quick. You sure?' But when she's going through it, it's going to be a long day."

Cardi holds herself to exorbitant standards. She wants the album to have a wide reach, but also reflect that she's a mosaic of a woman. "I'm a different person every single day," she says. "When I'm in a good mood and I'm with my friends, [I'm] like, 'Damn, I want my shit to be played in this club.' But then I might be mad with my man, so it's like now I want to do *this* song. But *then* I want to do a pop record. I want to do my sing-y shit."

More than anything, Cardi wants to prove once and for all that the past six years haven't happened by luck or hype, and she's working painstakingly, anxiety-inducingly hard to do so. After I leave the studio, Cardi needs to pore over her unmixed and unmastered songs. When I see her next, in New York, I watch her punch in lines dozens of times, fixating on her every tic, pitch, inflection, accent. She surveys confidants from all walks of life — "I have friends that are scammers, and I got bitches that work a 9-to-5" — on her works in progress. She endures the punishment of being away from home.

So, when people doubt her dedication to her craft, it gets under her skin. "Like yesterday, I was scrolling through TikTok and a bitch made me cry," she admits solemnly from the studio couch. "She was just like, 'She has got to give it up. She's better off being an influencer. You was cosplaying being a rapper. Because you don't take it seriously. That's why you don't put out your music.' And it's like, I take my music so fucking seriously that that's why I don't put it out. Because if it's not perfect to my ear, if every fucking word doesn't sound like it's pronounced right, if the beat is overpowering the words or the words is overpowering the beat, I don't want to put it out."

She continues: "When you give so much and somebody just drags it down, like you're just playing with your pussy all day, just watching Netflix all fucking day long, it's very hurtful."

Of course, the album is just one hurdle. Now that Cardi B, the daughter of a Dominican-born cabbie father and a careful Trinidadian mother, raised poor in the Bronx, has earned most of what she's wanted, she's been tasked with a new kind of survival: propelling her life, family, and legacy forward without getting stuck in the traps of perfectionism or criticism. And as she works to solidify her status as a rap icon, she struggles to manage the more mortal but no less important challenges of motherhood and marriage.

Cardi B's home is at its homiest on the weekends. That's when, she tells me in L.A., she and the eight people who live with her in New Jersey — her kids Kulture (age five) and Wave (age two), plus an aunt, a niece, and four cousins — are joined by even more family. Cardi feels the most like herself then, with everyone sharing food and music. "We do a lot of oxtail. We do a lot of fried fish," she says. "We do a lot of crab legs. We do a lot of goat." She has a Filipino aunt by marriage who makes desserts with mango, condensed milk, and lychee jelly, as well as a savory meat dish Cardi loves but the name of which she can't recall. "It looks like

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a little burrito, a little piece of doo-doo," she says, fondly. The kitchen, however, isn't Cardi's domain. "One thing I hate doing is cooking," she says. "It takes too much of my time."

Cardi's family proudly plays her songs at the house, though she'd rather they didn't. "I'm like, 'Oh, God, here y'all go,'" she says with a bashful smile, elongating the "o" for dramatic effect. Most often though, they listen to Spanish-language music. "My country" — she means the Dominican Republic — "they listen to merengue, they listen to típico, they listen to bachata. I'm really into that." She'd like to make a Spanish-language album in the near future. "As soon as I finish this album, I am going to fucking Puerto Rico," Cardi says, especially wanting to make reggaeton there.

Cardi's preferences are dictated by her moods. "If I feel good, if I'm with my family, if I'm eating goat, I'm going to listen to merengue; Antony Santos or just local Dominican artists," she says. "If I'm moody, I'd probably listen to a very old Shakira song or her new songs." Rocío Dúrcal, the late, legendary artist known to fans as la Reina de las Rancheras, is one of her favorites: "When I'm going through shit with my mans, I like to listen to her."

When Cardi was younger, she told herself she'd be a mother by 25, a prophecy she fulfilled at what seemed like an inopportune time: She gave birth just months after *Invasion of Privacy* dropped, and right as she was planning for a national tour. "I was really, really scared," says Cardi. "I just [felt] like, damn, I'm letting everybody down. I'm letting my family down. I'm letting everybody that works for me down."

She backed out of the tour to be home with Kulture. "My baby was so little — germs and planes and ear popping on a newborn?" asks Cardi. "Can you imagine a baby in a fucking tour bus?" She compared the first year of motherhood to competing on a game show — think the obstacle course on vintage Nickelodeon's *Legend of the Hidden Temple*, only on two hours of sleep. "It fucked me up," she says. "Yo, postpartum is something you can't even explain."

I ask her if she means postpartum *depression*. "Postpartum *everything*. It becomes depression because it's a drastic change," she says. When she had Wave in 2021, she was better able to stay afloat. She found reprieve in a trip to Paris soon after he was born, but also at her local IHOP, where she'd often roll solo for Bananas Foster pancakes.

When she's with her children, Cardi indulges in simple pleasures — cuddling in bed, taking them to Target. She and Kulture enjoy dates at the gym and restaurants, and time together at her dance rehearsals and studio sessions. "My daughter [can] talk, honey," she says, admiring Kulture's curiosity. "It'd be like 10 questions in a minute." Her daughter loves her piano lessons, and two of Cardi's dancers — the Twins, she calls them — give Kulture and her cousin private classes, having started by letting the girls pick routines on TikTok, per Cardi's instructions.

Wave already loves rap music, Cardi says, noting "he's a turnt lil boy." Kulture's favorite musicians are her parents. She loves "Clout," which features both of them. But more than anything, Cardi says, they like music made for kids, performed by children like a Russian-American YouTube star named Nastya and rap sensation That Girl Lay Lay, who had a show on Nick. "They're innocent, really innocent," she coos.

Despite the trials of motherhood, Cardi wouldn't change a thing, "It's like it's meant to be. The stars align. My kids are the best decisions I ever made."

In December, Cardi filmed herself on Instagram Live while she was at her wit's end, and it was gutting.

"I TAKE MY MUSIC SO FUCKING SERIOUSLY. BECAUSE IF IT'S NOT PERFECT TO MY EAR, I DON'T WANT TO PUT IT OUT."

CARDI B

"This motherfucker really likes to play games with me when I'm at my most vulnerable time," she said. Only her head above the neck and her slender, frantic, stiletto-nailed fingers were in the frame as she hollered, her voice cracking and face slipping off camera as she went on. "You really been doing me dirty after so many fucking years!" she yelled. "And it's so crazy that I got to go to the fucking internet because whenever the fuck I tell you something, you don't take shit seriously, and I'm so tired of it! I'm so fucking tired of this bitch-ass nigga!"

She was talking about Offset, her husband of nearly seven years. Not long before that clip, Cardi had made a surprising revelation on another Instagram Live — she'd actually been single "for a minute now."

But later, she'd reveal to the world (and to me) that things are more complicated. In February, she went on a Valentine's Day date with him and was caught trying to hide makeup smudged from making out. The next month, she'd clarify that despite the breakup, she was still married. She doesn't include Offset when she lists the people who live with her, but later tells me, "When Offset comes around, he comes around, so he's a helping hand, too." In late April, they were spotted happily together at a New York Knicks game.

Cardi B and Offset began dating in 2017, when Offset's rap trio Migos were hip-hop's hottest and most trend-setting unit. She'd had some rough dating experience with boyfriends — including one who'd overpower her in their physical fights, and another who made her feel she was too broke, too skinny, too loud — somehow too much yet never enough, she says. "Once I cut him off and I stopped caring about what he [thought] about me," she says, "I started doing videos on Instagram. That's how I got famous, because it was like, 'Fuck him.'"

In Offset, she finally found a partner who built her up instead of breaking her down. "When I met Offset, he was super rich and I just got my fucking first $200,000 in the bank," she recalls. "He never made me feel like I was little to him. He actually always used to tell me, 'You a fucking superstar, watch.'"

Cardi and Offset got married at home in sweats in September 2017 (Cardi's white, with metallic trim, Offset's black, with white checkerboarding down the sides), though Offset later proposed to Cardi flashily at one of her shows, complete with an eight-carat ring. Cardi moved in with Offset in Atlanta, his hometown, but hated it, feeling isolated.

There have been other challenges — not the least of which was Offset's infidelity. Cardi told *Vogue* in 2020 that her husband had cheated but they had worked through it. Later that year, Cardi filed for a divorce, explaining that it was not due to cheating, but misalignment. "I just got tired of fucking arguing," she said then. "I got tired of not seeing things eye to eye." But less than two months later, Cardi withdrew her claim, and the next year, they celebrated Wave's arrival together.

In 2022, Cardi was sentenced to 15 days of community service for separate attacks on a pair of bartenders at a strip club in Queens four years prior, in what authorities alleged stemmed from

"IT'S NOT EVEN ABOUT, 'HOW DO YOU LEAVE A PARTNER?' HOW DO YOU STOP TALKING TO YOUR BEST FRIEND?"

a romantic rivalry over Offset. She pleaded guilty to the charges against her before a trial was set to start, saying she was modeling accountability for her children. (She's faced other legal issues over the years, including a successful lawsuit against a defamatory blogger. She's currently a defendant in a suit related to an alleged assault on a security guard that's slated to go to trial in late May.)

In L.A., I ask Cardi what she cherishes in her marriage and what's been difficult. The question seems to suck the air out of the room, but she answers calmly. "The part I love is that we really like each other, like a support system. We're really both each other's cheerleader. I don't really like talking to people. I'm not as social. If I want something from somebody, he'll be the one that will talk. Because I don't like asking."

When she gets to the challenges in her marriage, I'm surprised to hear her zero in on her own shortcomings. "We have our own bad stuff," she says. "We're from two different worlds. Sometimes I cannot be ... not that I cannot be a wife. It's just like, my career takes my life. You know what I'm saying? My career comes first, then my kids come second. And then sometimes I don't realize that I'm putting so many things before my relationship."

I tell her that sounds accountable, like she's saying, *There's room for me to grow in the relationship too.*

"I don't want to grow," Cardi says. "I remember last year when we was going through our hard time. And it's like, 'Put your album out. You're overstressing. When was the last time we went on a vacation?' And it's like, 'I don't got time to go on a vacation, because this comes first.' This comes first and then my kids come second. The little things I have to take care of then comes. I sometimes feel like I do probably put my relationship last." (Later, she'll tweak that list of priorities — more on that in a moment.)

I ask Cardi what she's decided to do about her marriage. "I think it through. We think it through, because we do love each other. It's not even about love. We're best friends. And it's like, 'OK. Well, there was a time that I didn't have a best friend, or I didn't have a support system.' It's not even about 'How do you leave a partner?' How do you stop talking to your best friend?"

Once Cardi drops her second album, she'll finally tour, which will mean missing Kulture and Wave for long stretches. Would she consider a residency, of the sort Adele and Usher have taken up? "No, you've got to [go] for everybody from different states," she says. "That's how I promoted my mixtape."

"You're also not in the same position you were when you did that," I offer.

"Yeah, but somebody might not be able to afford a ticket to go see you in a residency in Vegas," she reasons. "Somebody could just afford a $200 ticket, but they can't afford a $200 ticket and then a flight. And you got to touch everybody. That's why I feel like a lot of these people don't have fan bases, because they never touch the people. They just became famous, and they never went to a chitlin' circuit. They never been to Greenville, North Carolina. They never fuckin' went to a Baton Rouge type of shit."

When she first got popular as a dancer, she recalls, she hit little clubs for just $2,000, running around the country in her old manager's PT Cruiser. As a rapper, she remembers, "I went to Mississippi, a small town, and they was having a slap-fighting contest. I had the best time of my life. I remember one time when I went to Memphis and, oh, my gosh, I couldn't even see because it was smoked out. They was having a banana-sucking contest. I loved it. Or one time in North Carolina, they literally had me performing in a barn. There was a lot of people in there."

Cardi emerged on the scene as a people's princess from a working-class background, and she's been vocal on social issues, too, from New York's city and state government to Social Security and immigration. A political junkie with an encyclopedic recollection of American presidents, she became a sought-after pundit, endorsing and interviewing Bernie Sanders and then Joe Biden as they pursued the presidency.

Then, last November, she declared she'd never do it again — for any president or hopeful. By March, she had told L.A. radio host Big Boy she wouldn't even vote in the upcoming presidential election. She tells me she means it. "I don't fuck with both of y'all niggas," she says of Biden and Trump. Before, she had seen Trump as a dire threat, but under Biden, she's felt "layers and layers of disappointment" from what she sees as domestic and foreign mismanagement. The cost of living is too high, wages are too low, and too little is being done about it, she says. "I feel like people got betrayed."

"It's just like, damn, y'all not caring about nobody," she says. "Then, it really gets me upset that there is solutions to it. There is a solution. I know there's a solution because you're spending billions of dollars on any fucking thing."

After President Biden insisted the U.S. could fund both Israel and Ukraine in their respective wars against Gaza and Russia in October, Cardi spoke out against it. She echoes the sentiment with me, but is concerned artists of color can get "blackballed" for talking about the war in Gaza. "[America] don't pay for endless wars for countries that have been going through shit for a very long time," she says. "There's countries [where] kids are getting killed every single day, but because the [U.S.] won't benefit from that country, they won't help. I don't like that America has this superhero cape on. We never did things to be superheroes. We did things for our own convenience."

As we talk politics, Cardi is mindful of her words. With her life under a microscope, she's struggled lately with how much to open up — on anything. The impulses that have made her both a public darling and tabloid target are similar: She's had an uncanny willingness to be staunchly opinionated and bewilderingly honest, to be imperfect on camera, to divulge the typically embarrassing. Now, even on her album, she's been hedging. "I really want to talk about the life changes that I've been dealing with the past six, seven years," she says of her new music. "But then it's just like, I feel like people don't deserve to know because people use my pain against me."

Shortly after that video eviscerating Offset, Nicki Minaj — with whom Cardi has had a hostile relationship for years — posted a photograph of Michael Jackson gleefully peering out of a car window, which many thought mocked Cardi's furor. A flurry of blogs and commentators ran stories about the perceived slight, Cardi's assumed response ("Take your man to a park and leave me alone," she had written on X), and the women's warring fan bases. So, as Cardi opened up about a breakdown in her marriage, an online ecosystem turned it to gossip fodder and stan-war artillery. But for as much as she shares online, Cardi would say that she's actually prone to keep even more to herself. "I'm a lonely sufferer," she says.

I ask Cardi what her self-care looks like. "Being at home," she says. "When I was off social media and nobody knew what I was doing, I was at peace a lot. But what am I going to do? Never post or never work again because that's peace? No. I don't ever want my daughter or my son to ever give up on something because they can't take the pressure of what people say about them. I got to set that example. It's like, 'Y'all never going to break me.' Because I got something to prove to myself. I also got to prove something to the haters. I've got to prove it to my own kids."

"I WANT TO TALK ABOUT LIFE CHANGES I'VE BEEN DEALING WITH, BUT PEOPLE USE MY PAIN AGAINST ME."

Three weeks later, it's 2 a.m. in New York, and Cardi B is at Jungle City Studios, trying to perfect two couplets on a new song. She gives it 13 takes before Brunson, the engineer, suggests some tea.

Cardi sips the green tea he lovingly orders her — extra sweet, of course, along with her bodega favorite, buttered rolls — in the hopes it may make her a little less nasal. Cardi turned up to the studio absolutely disheveled: The lining of her long black lace-front

THIS SPREAD AND OPENING SPREAD: DRESS BY MUGLER. BOOTS BY BALENCIAGA. PREVIOUS SPREADS: DRESS BY Y-PROJECT.

wig shows from her forehead, the layered curls stiff and frizzy. She's wearing cute sweats — black joggers and an orange hoodie with a vibrant painting of what looks like the Virgin Mary, designed by her 22-year-old cousin, Marcelito — but she's visibly uncomfortable. The day before, she'd been stricken with an illness she theorizes could have come from someone in her house, a bout of migraines, or the Hamburger Helper she made for the first time in a while disagreeing with her. She keeps Excedrin and Pepto Bismol by her side at the studio. "They need to endorse me, honey," she says of Pepto. "Because that's something I fucking use."

Right now, Cardi is prioritizing songs from the album that have features, or need them placed. She wants them to sound irresistible to the artists, who she says span a gamut of rappers and singers. (She also mentions she had fun working on a song with DJ Khaled, but won't confirm what for.)

I can only hear the new song seeping out of her headphones. I catch the Afro-Caribbean energy of the beat, then hear Cardi singing speedily and in a rather high register. With every few attempts at the lines she's trying to get down, she and Brunson work on tweaks — bringing the pitch down, rapping them more, even changing the lyrics slightly.

"Sounds fucking terrible," Cardi mutters.

"Don't be hard on yourself," Brunson says brightly.

"Shut the fuck up," Cardi bites back cartoonishly, like an exaggerated mob boss. "I fucking hate it." She tries again about 33 more times.

In the process, she stops to talk about some random topics: the cabbie broadcast-news network her dad used to listen to, loving New York, relaxing with ASMR. At one point, she sniffs the air and senses that Offset had been in the studio the night before. "It smells like weed and it smells like cologne," she says. "But I don't smell pussy. Better not come to my studio with no hoes."

I'm surprised that Cardi is back on the East Coast after having banished herself to Los Angeles to finish the album. She tells me a lot of her family has moved out of her house, leaving just Marcelito to help with the kids — she has to look for a nanny, something she's deeply uneasy about. For now, she's leaning more on her parents, but she's wary of overextending them. "I had them kids," she says. "They came out of my pussy, not my mom's. They mine." Offset is around and helping out, having just finished his own tour, but Cardi still feels stretched thin. "My kids come first. My kids come before anything," she says, having reframed her priorities since our last meeting.

She is particularly frustrated that some of her fans expect her to churn out social media content in the midst of all this — never mind that, in recent days, she did lengthy live sessions on Instagram and TikTok. Both were casual, with Cardi at home (snacking on junk food in her mom's house for the former). "Not only [are] just your fans telling you that," she continues, "you got to deal with what I'm dealing with now — motherhood — that nobody could solve for me. No assistant could solve for me. No husband could solve for me. No label could solve for me. Nobody could solve what's going on in my home, and what's going on in my home is we have a shortage of my kids being taken care of. I got to solve it."

Cardi gets two calls that offer a glimpse of how she's coping. "Hubington, FaceTime Video," her iPhone announces at one point. I catch Offset on the screen, looking a bit like a dental patient. "You got that gold tooth?" she asks him. "You got it done! It don't look country! Looks good."

"You like it?" asks Offset.

"I love it."

They chat breezily with each other for just a couple of minutes before ending the call. "It seems like you and Offset are doing good?" I pose.

"We're all right now," Cardi says. With a giggle, she waves off my inquiry about Offset updates.

The other call, Siri announces, is from an unsaved Los Angeles number. "My therapist," Cardi says. Cardi's tried to let her rage or sadness motivate her in the booth, she tells me, but her voice just ends up cracking and she can't hit the melodies. "So I just got a therapist, and I really like her."

The counselor is just calling to check on her. Cardi relays that she needed a hand with the kids, but that she's good. She and the therapist are just getting started; back in L.A. she'd told me she wasn't in therapy, having found it hard to focus during the sessions. "It was just too much going on," Cardi says when I ask about her change of heart. "And when there's too much going on, it fucks up my work."

The tension Cardi brought with her to Jungle City melts away as she and Brunson play some favorite beats from the album. She's recorded lyrics to them, but she's not ready to share those just yet; the track list and song titles are not final either. "Better Than You" reminds me of UGK and OutKast's "Int'l Players Anthem (I Choose You)," with a pitched-up vocal sample, rich, violin-like synths, and rolling Southern drums. Cardi notes that its sound — courtesy of the producer Vinylz, whom she's known since her days as a dancer — is brand-new for her.

"I feel like the beat is not a beat you could get rowdy on," she says. "It's a real calm beat. And I had two choices, I could do more of an inspirational type of record — 'I used to grind all my life' — but then I decided to be like, 'No, I'm going to shit on you bitches.'"

When they play another beat, this one for a song called "Pick It Up," Cardi's face brightens. She hums with her eyes closed, throwing her head back, starbursting her fingers. It's one of her pop-radio songs, she says, sugary with high-femme twinkles and chimes and keys that are distorted like a fun-house mirror. Cardi rounds out the preview with a sexy drill production from her regular collaborator SwanQo, who produced "Like What (Freestyle)," "Up," and more. It's called "Don't Do Too Much," and it's glittery and animated, with a playful whistle as its through line. Cardi says she gets some jokes off on it. "If it was up to me," she says, "my whole album would sound like drill."

In fact, there are a few left-field approaches she's ruminated on. "You see how Beyoncé is doing a country-album type shit and it's just she's doing what she likes?" she asks me. "If it was up to me, I would do songs like 'Erotica' because that's what I like. I like Madonna's *Erotica*, 'Justify My Love.' If I was on that level that Beyoncé's at, I would do songs like that." But for now, Cardi thinks she still needs to do her due diligence in hip-hop more traditionally first.

Cardi is ruthless with producers; most beats tend to bore her. "It's like, 'Just come ready,'" she says. "Because I'm a really quick person. I give you a description, what I want to hear, what I like, how I sound, what I've been listening to lately. Y'all come, y'all play me y'all shit. If I don't like it, it's like, 'Sorry, next time.'"

One who's really impressed her is fellow Bronxite Cash Cobain, whose star as both a producer and rapper has been rising in the horny, laid-back, sexy drill movement. Both rappers have a penchant for "[saying] things that shouldn't be said, for real," he tells me later. In L.A., in March, Cash played Cardi about 30 tracks, many of which she loved. "I was like, 'Damn, now I got to make a lot of choices because I don't want my whole album to sound like this,'" Cardi says.

Cash said he could see Cardi's work ethic before he ever met her, way back when he was 19, hearing her blasting from the city's hip-hop stations, Hot 97 and Power 105. "All this rapping shit, staying in the right pocket, the voice, and everything being so perfect — that's hard work," he says. "And her product is amazing. It's not just something that she's just throwing out."

In the seven years since "Bodak Yellow," a new crop of artists from New York — from all over — have come of age with Cardi as a North Star. "I know for a fact I'm a staple," she says finally, after having fretted about making a statement, cementing her place, and besting herself with her next album. "I know for a fact that I [opened] a fucking door. I know for a fact that I [can] rap. I know for a fact I make fucking hits. Sometimes people be trying to belittle me, and it's like, 'No, I'm that bitch and y'all fucking know it.'"

She pulls out her phone and beckons me near. "I want you to see this," she says. "This is not even about bragging." She opens a text conversation with a manager, pulling up a graphic detailing a performance offer that looked to be for $1.5 million. "That's for one show," says Cardi. In the text chain, the manager mentions that he thinks he can get it to $2 million.

She seems to think back to the TikTok that made her cry. "If I was doing things for money," she says, "I would put out music every month because nothing pays me more than shows. I'm turning down these concerts because I don't got no new music."

She's confident that if she wanted to, she could milk her star power to no end. "But I care about how my music sound," she says. "I care about my quality. I care about giving something special every single time."

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DEVIL WITH A CAUSE

KID ROCK was once America's favorite hard-partying rock star, a gregarious showman able to bring together rap, rock, and country audiences. Then he went die-hard MAGA, dividing his fan base and leaving many wondering what the hell happened

BY DAVID PEISNER PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY MIKE MCQUADE

EUROPE
ASIA
AUSTRALIA
AFRICA
AMERICA
TRADE MARK

WHEN YOU VISIT BOB RITCHIE AT HIS HOME

in the jagged hills outside Nashville, the guy who will likely greet you at the door is a tall, well-dressed, exceedingly polite gentleman who goes by "Uncle Tom." Because of course he does. Ritchie makes his living as Kid Rock, but a big part of being Kid Rock these days involves doing things that are simultaneously provocative, offensive, and, at least to him, funny. It tracks, then, that a middle-aged white guy who began his career more than three decades ago in thrall of a Black art form, but who has since thrown his lot in with an overwhelmingly white political movement criticized for its racist rhetoric, would have a white butler named after a racial slur aimed at Black people who are overly accommodating to the white establishment. It's all a little dizzying. Like so much in the world of Kid Rock circa 2024, it leaves you wondering, "Is he serious? Is he fucking with me? Does he himself even know?"

At any rate, there I am on a Thursday afternoon in April, being ushered by the aforementioned Uncle Tom into a house that itself feels like a joke devised to test whether its visitors get it. Modeled to look like the White House, the extravagant, airy mansion is decorated with taxidermied hunting trophies and neon beer signs. The bathroom hand towels are monogrammed with an "R," and a mirror near the sink has a naked woman in a "Liberty" headband painted on it in pink. Images of Kid Rock's platinum records adorn the garage doors. Ritchie's entire sprawling 214-acre compound, which includes a saloon, a studio, and a cavernous hangar with a pickleball court, a basketball hoop, and the original General Lee from *The Dukes of Hazzard* in it, feels like what a 13-year-old boy might sketch if you asked him to design his dream home.

Tom procures a can of Miller Lite for me from the fridge in the kitchen, then leads me to the back patio, where Ritchie is sitting with a charcuterie board on the table in front of him, and the breathtaking panorama of the surrounding countryside staring him in the face. Ritchie stands, shakes my hand, and asks Tom for a white wine with ice and a cigar.

"That's his real name, by the way," Ritchie says with a sharp laugh. "Don't give me some shit in the article."

Ritchie is wearing dark sunglasses, a black shirt, jeans, and boots that he says "may or may not be snakeskin." His stringy blond hair runs straight to his shoulders from underneath a white-and-red baseball hat with the phrase "This Bud's for You" emblazoned on the front of it, framing a face that, at 53, looks more weathered than boyish. He claims he didn't realize he was wearing the hat — something he'll claim again two hours later to Fox News host Laura Ingraham, when he insists I join him in the back of an unmarked van in his driveway to record an appearance on her show — but I find this difficult to believe. The hat gives him an opening to retell the story of his beef and recent reconciliation with Anheuser-Busch.

Last year, Ritchie responded to the company's decision to partner with transgender social media influencer Dylan Mulvaney for a Bud Light promotion by posting a video of him shooting up cans of the beer with an MP5 submachine gun, and declaring "Fuck Bud Light. Fuck Anheuser-Busch." The partnership between an iconic beer company and a trans woman had already prompted a right-wing boycott of the beer maker, and Ritchie's stunt fanned the flames. He was criticized for encouraging anti-trans bigotry and violence. Far from being repentant, Ritchie viewed the company's subsequent stock-price wobble as vindication, and claims its top brass reached out to him personally, eager to mend fences. As he puts it to Ingraham, even though the company "messed up," he's moved on from the boycott. (Anheuser-Busch didn't respond to my request for comment on this meeting.)

"I DON'T SUGARCOAT SHIT, BUT EVERYTHING BECAME THIS GOTCHA MOMENT. LOOK AROUND. I LIVE IN MY OWN WORLD. AND IT'S GREAT."

"We've got bigger targets," he says, referencing Planet Fitness, which is currently in the crosshairs of the right-wing outrage machine for its trans-inclusive policies, and Ben & Jerry's, a perpetual bugaboo among conservatives. "I don't want to hurt people's jobs and stuff like that when they don't have any dog in the fight, but there's a whole lot of other companies we should be going after." Bulldozing past the inherent contradictions in that sentence, Ritchie uses the rest of his Fox appearance to inveigh against "DEI crap," predict electoral victory for Donald Trump in Michigan, and suggest that listening to the national anthem will make "liberal tears fall like rain."

Kid Rock wasn't always like this. When he first broke through with *Devil Without a Cause* in the late Nineties, on the heels of an alt-rock era whose biggest stars — Kurt Cobain, Eddie Vedder, Chris Cornell — were often cripplingly conflicted about the very idea of stardom, Ritchie made rap rock full of swagger, bravado, and party-starting anarchy. Even as he began hinting at a rightward political lean in the late 2000s, he still managed to inhabit a cultural middle ground, crossing boundaries between musical genres and political ideologies with an easygoing, can't-we-all-just-get-drunk-together nonchalance. Whether he was performing with Run-D.M.C., (briefly) marrying Pamela Anderson, or getting into a fight at a Waffle House at 5 a.m., Kid Rock's very existence felt like a 100-decibel reminder that rock & roll was supposed to be fun. Rolling Stone itself was all-in on this version of Kid Rock, twice putting him on the magazine's cover solo and declaring him "the king of old-school partying and take-no-prisoners boasting."

Over the past decade, though, he's grown increasingly polarizing, eager to troll liberals and engage in one culture-war dust-up after another. He's wrapped himself in all things Trump and become as much a fixture of the MAGA Cinematic Universe as Steve Bannon, Mike Lindell, or Kari Lake. In fact, just before we crowd into that van for the Fox News appearance, Ritchie flashes his cellphone toward me to show he's calling the man he now winkingly refers to as "one of my besties." Trump doesn't pick up. "I was going to tell him I'm going on Laura Ingraham," Ritchie tells me. "He loves to watch when I do Fox hits."

I'd started working on a story about Kid Rock's transformation from everyone's favorite life-of-the-party rock star into this fervent MAGA warrior nearly a year earlier. Until a couple of days before our meeting at his house, I'd given up hope that he'd talk to me. I'd reached out repeatedly to his manager to try to set up an interview but got no response. As I began contacting others in his inner circle — friends, bandmates — Ritchie was telling them not to talk to me. I pressed ahead and spoke to more than a dozen people who'd been close to him at various points in his career. Many were dismayed at the extreme political turn Kid Rock had taken.

Producer and engineer Mike E. Clark, who has a long history with Ritchie going back to the late 1980s, compared it to "losing a family member," and said he no longer hung up his Kid Rock platinum records "because of what it represents now." Kenny Olson, who played lead guitar for Ritchie for more than a decade starting in the mid-1990s, was just perplexed.

"I don't understand where a lot of this came from," he told me. "I've always felt music should inspire people, not divide people. A lot of people from back in the day ask me, 'What's going on?' I don't know."

In an age when many people have a story about a relative who arrived at Thanksgiving in a red MAGA hat, and shortly thereafter started forwarding BitChute videos and QAnon memes, the idea that a rich white guy

CONFEDERACY OF DUNCES
Ritchie performing in front of a Confederate flag at the Trump Taj Mahal Casino in Atlantic City, New Jersey, in 2004. "I never flew the flag with hate in my heart.... I love Black people," he said in 2011.

THE MAGA WHISPERER
Ritchie and Trump ringside at a 2023 UFC fight in Miami. The rock star is proud of his relationship with the former president and, in addition to golfing with Trump, frequently calls him to chat, especially when Ritchie is about to appear on political talk shows. "He loves to watch when I do Fox hits," Ritchie says, and refers to Trump as "one of my besties."

would become a die-hard Trump supporter is not exactly shocking. But Ritchie always seemed to be in on the joke of his outrageous Kid Rock persona. These days, though, it's hard not to wonder who's at the wheel.

Obviously, the best person to address this is Ritchie himself, so I sent one last Hail Mary to his manager. Much to my surprise, this time, I got a response: an offer to meet Ritchie two days later for what was supposed to be a 90-minute tête-à-tête.

I'm not really sure what changed his mind. It could be that he knows a contentious story in Rolling Stone will give him a platform to shout about liberal-media bias and bolster his status on the right. Or it could just be that he's got something to promote, a new festival he co-founded called Rock the Country that's playing in seven smaller cities and towns across Appalachia and the Southeast this spring and summer. At any rate, by the time we're done with Laura Ingraham, we've blown way past our allotted time, but he's just getting warmed up. Soon enough, he'll get drunk and belligerent, and the evening will go way off the rails, but at the moment, things are still pretty cordial. He tells me that until a few weeks ago, he'd done very few interviews in the past decade.

"I don't sugarcoat shit, but everything became this gotcha moment," he says. "That's why I've been turning you down for so long. I don't need it." He motions with his hand back toward his house and then forward toward the stunning view of the deep, green valley in front of him. "Look around. I live in my own world. And it's great."

To understand where Kid Rock ended up, you need to understand where he started. Although Romeo, Michigan, is often described as a Detroit suburb, when Ritchie was growing up there in the Seventies and Eighties, such a designation was a stretch. The Detroit suburbs were geographically sprawling even then, but most people probably would have considered Romeo at the distant edge of that sprawl. The Ritchie family home was on the outskirts of Romeo itself, around an hour's drive from downtown Detroit.

I grew up in the Detroit suburbs in that same era, and when I first sit down with Ritchie, we reminisce a bit about living there back then. In the 1980s, Detroit was in the midst of a long, painful, and still ongoing transition. The auto industry had built the city into a cosmopolitan hub in the first half of the 20th century. Well-paying factory jobs drew workers from the South and nourished a thriving polyglot middle class. By 1940, it was one of the largest cities in the U.S. Starting in the 1960s, though, a string of developments — higher gas prices, the rise of foreign automakers, the shuttering of factories, the 1967 riots, and disastrous city-planning decisions — changed Detroit's trajectory. The city's population began to contract. Specifically, white families and white-owned businesses moved to the suburbs in droves, shrinking the tax base and further accelerating this trend.

It's hard to overstate how frantic the white flight from Detroit has been. In 1940, the city was more than 90 percent white. Today, it's barely more than 10 percent. The exodus fueled a sense of fear, resentment, and distrust between the white suburban population and Black residents of the city. During the years Ritchie and I were growing up, the divide between Detroit and the surrounding region hardened into a fixed color line drawn right at the city's northern border, Eight Mile Road.

Culturally, Romeo had more in common with small towns in rural parts of the state that became infamous for making Michigan a hotbed of militia activity than it did with Detroit. As much as the auto industry had drawn Black workers from places like Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi, it had also attracted a steady diet of white workers from below the Mason-Dixon Line and parts of Appalachia. They brought with them a romanticism about the South and fostered an enthusiasm for country music that endured in the area. Bobby Bare's 1963 Top 10 country hit, his version of "Detroit City," describes an autoworker homesick for "those cotton fields and home." Twenty-five years later, it wasn't hard to find white kids in the Detroit suburbs driving pickup trucks adorned with Confederate-flag bumper stickers, blasting country music.

Ritchie tells me that his grandfather had family from Kentucky. "They grew up on mountain music and hillbilly music."

Although Ritchie often describes his upbringing as "middle class," it was beyond what most people would ascribe to the term. His father, Bill, who died in February, owned a large, successful Lincoln-Mercury dealership in the northern suburb of Sterling Heights, and for a time was president of the Detroit Automobile Dealers Association, an influential trade group. The family lived in an expansive 5,628-square-foot estate, built on more than five acres that included apple orchards, an in-ground pool, tennis courts, and a horse barn.

"He had a guesthouse bigger than my family home," says Wesley "Wes Chill" Gandy, a local rapper who met Ritchie when the latter was only about 14. At the time, Ritchie was just a skinny kid who knew how to operate some pretty basic recording equipment. Gandy would come to Ritchie's house to record nearly every weekend, and occasionally Ritchie would visit Gandy's home on the west side of Detroit. "You didn't see white kids in my neighborhood," says Gandy. "It was me that brought him into the city and introduced him to the Detroit culture. Bob is like a sponge. He absorbed a lot."

Ritchie began DJ'ing at parties and impressed with his turntable skills. He connected with a group of artists known as the Beast Crew, and with them started rapping, too. In the mid-Eighties, Ritchie's interest in hip-hop felt like a repudiation of his privileged upbringing and caused a rift with his father. "You could tell his father wasn't happy about him being around kids from the inner city," says Gandy. "His mom, his sisters, his brother, they were nice. But his father really was upset about him pursuing rap."

Ritchie's dad loved music, but his taste ran toward rock & roll and classic country. "He didn't understand what I was doing, rightfully so," says Ritchie, "this white kid from an upper-middle-class family running around the hood doing all this stuff."

Bill Ritchie, a registered Republican, had been president and sales manager at Crest Lincoln-Mercury before he bought the dealership outright in 1972. According to testimony he gave to the Federal Trade Commission, unionized mechanics and employees at his dealership went on strike in 1971, the year Bob was born, and the strike turned violent. Bill said his family was threatened. While driving home one night, he was run off the road by a couple of cars. After his next-door neighbor's front porch was bombed, police apparently told Bill that his house had been the intended target. Bill threatened to hire nonunion workers to replace his striking employees, and ultimately, Bill claimed, the strike ended without him making any concessions.

When I relay this story to Ritchie, he's never heard it, but it fits comfortably with the man he knew. "He was conflicted on unions," he says. "He'd always say they started as a great purpose. But at his heyday of the

PREVIOUS SPREAD: IMAGES IN ILLUSTRATION BY JEFFREY MAYER/WIREIMAGE; MANDEL NGAN/AFP/GETTY IMAGES; CHRIS POLK/FILMMAGIC; JEFF BOTTARI/ZUFFA LLC/GETTY IMAGES. THIS PAGE, FROM TOP: CHRIS POLK/FILMMAGIC; JEFF BOTTARI/ZUFFA LLC/GETTY IMAGES

dealership, he was anti-union. I remember him being like, 'Fuck those unions. They're all run by fucking crooks.'"

Ritchie has talked a lot about his troubled early relationship with his father and poured it into the 1993 song "My Oedipus Complex." "I never liked my old man," he sings. A few verses later, he describes his father advising him to "keep with your own and don't fuck up our gene pool" by "play[ing] the fool with a different color," a reference to Ritchie fathering his only child with a Black woman, which he did during this era.

"That's how I was feeling at the time," Ritchie says now of the song. "That was a stressful time when my son was born. A white kid, not married, bringing home a half-Black kid to a Catholic well-to-do family." Ritchie's father struggled to adapt at first. "There were borderline things, like maybe using the n-word at times, but my son and my dad became best friends. People say that people can't change. Yes, they fucking can." He says he was proud to see his son, who is now a father himself and lives nearby, tearing up at his father's funeral.

Ritchie's own relationship with his father would eventually turn around. "Ironically enough, when you make some money, it makes it a whole lot easier for people to understand," he says.

In 1990, Ritchie headed to New York and signed with Jive Records. Back in Detroit, there was grumbling about Jive elevating a white rapper out of what was often called the Blackest city in America. The perception that Ritchie did little to help those who'd given him safe passage in the Detroit rap community left a bad taste in the mouths of some of his compatriots. According to Brian Harmon, a rapper who goes by "Champtown" and who was one of the leaders of the Beast Crew, Jive was interested in signing him as well, but claims Ritchie undermined the deal. "This is the worst ZIP code in America," Harmon says. "We get a bag of chips, we share it amongst each other. We get a Faygo two-liter, we get five cups. Kid Rock, growing up around rich parents, didn't quite understand sharing."

When I ask Ritchie about this, he shakes his head. "I've got a lot of love for Champ, but he's full of shit in more ways than you can fucking imagine," he says. "I'm not going to get into it because I'm sure he's got his side, but I'd take everything there with a grain of salt."

Kid Rock's Jive debut, *Grits Sandwiches for Breakfast,* a sex-obsessed goof equally indebted to the twin poles of late-Eighties party rap, the Beastie Boys' *Licensed to Ill* and 2 Live Crew's *As Nasty As They Wanna Be,* didn't connect with audiences, and amid a subsequent Vanilla Ice-induced backlash, he was dropped from the label. Back in Detroit, licking his wounds, Ritchie experimented musically, leaning more on classic rock and metal. The Clark co-produced result, *The Polyfuze Method,* was released on an independent label in 1993. The same year, he recorded an amped-up version of Hank Williams Jr.'s "A Country Boy Can Survive."

"Kid Rock gravitated toward his audience," says Chris "Doc Roun-Cee" Pouncy, another Beast Crew member. "If his audience was predominantly white, which they were, he was going to play to them."

Harmon recalls a conversation with Ritchie around this time about his change in artistic direction. "He straight-up told me, 'I need to get back in touch with my whiteness,'" says Harmon. Gandy remembers Ritchie using the same phrase.

"That sounds like something I'd say," Ritchie admits. "I don't give a fuck how people take it."

The Detroit music scene during those years was small and felt a bit like a cultural backwater. Motown had long since decamped to California, and the city hadn't produced a credible star in more than a decade. There was a feeling then that mirrored the city's depopulation trend: The only way to succeed was to leave.

"It was hard to get a record deal in Detroit then," says Olson. "Chad Smith from the Red Hot Chili Peppers, Joey Mazzola from Sponge, and I all migrated out to California at different points."

But the relative isolation bred creative freedom. Ritchie's ambition and his omnivorous taste in music attracted a diverse crew of artists into his orbit in these years: Lonnie Motley and Shirley Hayden of Funkadelic; R&B singer Thornetta Davis; horrorcore-rap pioneer Esham; Michael and Andrew Nehra, who co-founded the soul-rock outfit Robert Bradley's Blackwater Surprise; Vinnie Dombroski from Sponge; Tino Gross of blues rockers the Howling Diablos; Matt O'Brien of funk-inflected post-punk group Big Chief; Eric Hoegemeyer of the glammy dance-rock outfit Charm Farm.

"I'M PART OF THE PROBLEM," RITCHIE SAYS. "SOMETIMES I LOOK IN THE MIRROR AND AM LIKE, 'WHY DON'T YOU SHUT THE FUCK UP TOO?'"

"I was the joke," says Ritchie. "It was not cool to be a white rapper."

Although Kid Rock's music was assiduously apolitical back then, there was an inclusive, open-minded approach to it that many of those involved found inspiring. Ritchie assembled a live band he called Twisted Brown Trucker that embodied that spirit.

"We were into funk, R&B, rock, the blues, swampy Southern country sounds," says Olson. "We had this fearless way of approaching the music."

Devil Without a Cause, released in 1998, was the product of this approach. The album eventually sold more than 11 million copies. At the time, Ritchie's main ideological commitment was to the doctrine of sex, drugs, and rock & roll. From the stage at Woodstock '99, he told the audience, "You want me to get political? Well, this is about as deep as Kid Rock thinks: Monica Lewinsky is a fuckin' ho, and Bill Clinton is a goddamned pimp!"

Over the decade or so that followed, Ritchie seemed more enamored with the spectacle of politics than any particular issues. He met Clinton and performed at an inaugural event for Barack Obama. Even though he backed Mitt Romney, a fellow Michigander, in his bid to unseat Obama in 2012, when he saw Obama at the Kennedy Center Honors the following year, Ritchie said there were "no hard feelings.... You respect the office of the president of the United States, and the great thing is, in four years we get to choose again."

Even as he grew more confident speaking about himself as a Republican, Ritchie consistently criticized the party's stance on issues like abortion and gay marriage. As he told Rolling Stone in 2013: "I tend to vote Republican, but I don't like the hardcore views on either side. I'm not in bed with anybody. I'd probably be more libertarian, but I'm a firm believer you have to pick a side. If you think differently, that's fine. I'd love to grab a beer and hear why you think that way."

During the time Ritchie was stumping for Romney, he was living part-time in Malibu, where one of his neighbors was the actor and progressive activist Sean Penn. The two unlikely friends were drinking scotch at Ritchie's house one night, along with Jameson Stafford, who'd begun working with Ritchie in the late Nineties as a videographer. Penn and Ritchie argued constantly over politics, but in the increasingly heated political environment saw their enduring friendship as an example to emulate. They decided to make a short film called *Americans,* which Stafford co-wrote and directed. It opens in a bar, and within a couple of minutes Penn and Ritchie are lobbing politically tinged insults at each other. As they're about to come to blows, a news report flashes onto the bar's TV, announcing the deaths of 26 Marines in Afghanistan, which prompts them to hug it out. The message is clear even before it flashes on the screen at the film's conclusion in big, block letters: "Don't Let Politics Divide Us. Thinking Differently ... Is What Made This Country Great."

Ritchie says he still believes this. "That thing's more relevant now than when we made it," he tells me between puffs on his cigar. "The message isn't getting across."

I ask whether he thinks he's helping much on that score.

"I'm part of the problem," he acknowledges. "I'm one of the polarizing people, no question. Sometimes I bitch about other people, then I look in the mirror and I'm like, 'Oh, yeah, why don't you shut the fuck up too?'"

So, is this mostly an impulse-control problem?

"It's a rich-guy issue," he says. "No fucks left. I'm not going to get it right every time, but I know my heart's right. I want the best for this country."

Back in the early 2010s, a sort of radical centrism was still baked into Kid Rock's brand. He'd banked enough goodwill to be able to get away with occasionally performing in front of a Confederate flag. When I mention it, he immediately grabs a photo album sitting nearby, flips it open, and points to a shot of himself from the early days of his career, wearing a shirt designed to look like the rebel battle flag. Next to him in the photo are all three members of Run-D.M.C.

"Nobody said a fucking word," he tells me. "No one. That was the thing until all this woke shit started happening."

Some Black members of his band gave him a pass. Misty Love, a former longtime backup singer for Kid Rock from the mid-Nineties through the mid-2000s, says the flag "didn't mean anything back when he used it. It was just part of the backdrop."

Ritchie insists there was no deeper intent than that. "I was using the Confederate flag because I love Lynyrd Skynyrd, and I think it just looks cool."

In 2011, when he received an NAACP Award in Detroit, protesters marched outside, denouncing his association with the flag. Right before he walked onstage to receive the award, he says, the head of the organization's Detroit chapter, the Rev. Wendell Anthony, asked him if he'd really performed with the flag. After Ritchie admitted he had, he says Anthony told him, "Oh, you ain't racist. You just dumb." (Anthony did not respond to my request for confirmation.) Once onstage, Ritchie told the audience, "I never flew the flag with hate in my heart.... I love Black people." But four years later, outside an exhibit Ritchie funded at the Detroit Historical Museum, where protesters returned to raise the same issue, Ritchie told Fox News host Megyn Kelly, "Please tell the people who are protesting to kiss my ass."

Looking back on it now, he's resolute: "I wasn't going to bow down and fucking apologize again. I'd already been through this fucking shit."

According to Love, Ritchie's political coming out put the Confederate-flag controversy in a different context. "It wasn't until he started tripping with Trump that it

started looking bad," says Love, who still considers Ritchie a friend. "The Trump situation changed the whole vibe. People say he's prejudiced. He's not. How can you be prejudiced if your son is Black?"

Others made the same point. "I never got the racist, homophobic vibe from him," says Barbara Payton, a backing singer who toured with Kid Rock in the 2000s. "As a gay woman, I wouldn't have worked for him if I did."

Even some, like Harmon, who've had personal gripes with Ritchie are inclined to give him the benefit of the doubt, at least to a point. "Do I think Kid Rock is straight-up racist? No," Harmon says. "Do I think Kid Rock is a dickhead? Yes."

Ritchie was one of the first entertainment figures to declare allegiance to Trump, in an interview with this magazine. "I'm digging Donald Trump," he said in early 2016, before the Republican primaries had begun. "My feeling: Let the business guy run it like a business. And his campaign has been entertaining as shit."

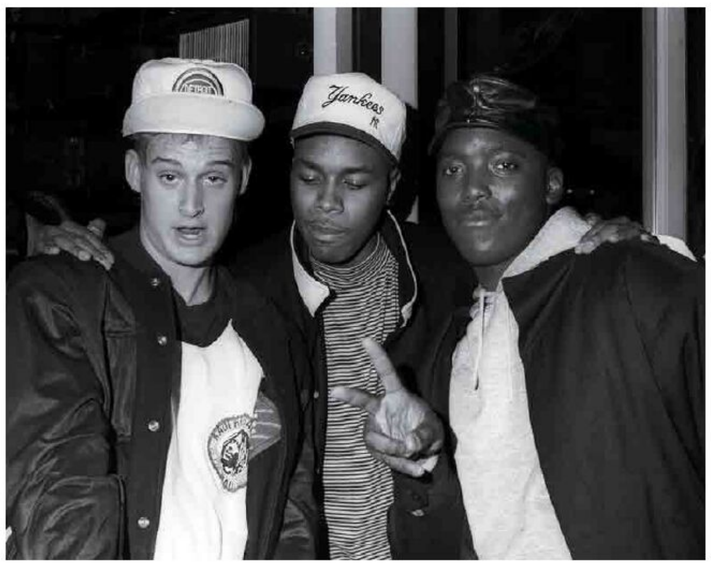
What began as a mild flirtation quickly bloomed into a full-blown love affair. Love wonders half-seriously if Ritchie's "been brainwashed. The Trumpsters are attracted to him, and I think they're absorbing him," she says. "Because the Kid Rock people know now isn't the Kid Rock I was around for years."

Over the past few years, Kid Rock shows have started to resemble Trump rallies. Clark, who helped craft Kid Rock's last major hit, "All Summer Long," worked as a monitor tech on tour with him in 2018, and was alarmed by what he saw. "He started throwing Trump up on the giant screen, like, 'This is your president now, so deal with it!'" he says. "I was horrified. It's a hate machine. It's all these white people, and it's like, 'What hasn't this country given to these people?' Especially Bob Ritchie. What hasn't this country given him? What are you so angry about?"

Two days after meeting with Ritchie at his house, I'll see this dynamic in person at a huge fairground in Gonzales, Louisiana, at the first installment of Rock the Country. Amid a sea of American flags, Trump 2024 merch, and more than 25,000 fans, Kid Rock will be introduced onstage by Tucker Carlson, then launch into a set that will include riffs about open borders, high taxes, and a declaration that "Joe Biden can kiss my motherfucking Anglo-Saxon ass." At one point, a video of Trump will appear on the screen behind Ritchie, lauding Kid Rock and his fans as "hardworking, God-fearing rock & roll patriots," before exhorting them to "make America rock again."

Even as Ritchie grew more politically outspoken during Trump's presidency, he'd nearly always kept politics off his albums. That ended with his 2022 release, *Bad Reputation*. On the blustery first single, "Don't Tell Me How to Live" — a title that sums up his political philosophy as well as any — he rails against snowflakes, fake news, participation trophies, and easily-offended millennials. "We the People" recycles far-right Covid talking points — "Wear your mask, take your pills/Now a whole generation's mentally ill/Fuck Fauci!" — then turns the anti-Biden meme "Let's Go Brandon!" into a shout-along chorus.

It would be easy to see his rightward political turn as a cynical business decision. After all, Kid Rock is nothing if not a crowd-pleaser. The same way he gave his fans what they wanted musically, shifting from hip-hop toward rock and country, he's also met them where they are ideologically. "This is a guy who has always had his pulse on who his audience is," says Thomas Valentino, who was Ritchie's lawyer for more than a decade, starting in the mid-Nineties. "Right now, he recognizes 90 percent of the people who come to his shows are buying into what he's doing and saying politically. He also leans that way, but he's a smart business guy. If he thinks he's going to make money taking a certain position, then I think a lot of those things are driven by business."



STILL THE KID
A 19-year-old Ritchie with D-Nice of Boogie Down Productions and Big D of Ultramagnetic MCs (from left) at Heavy D's NYC birthday party in 1990

Stafford, who remains close with Ritchie, says Ritchie is "definitely not faking" his political allegiance. "But I don't think he'll miss a good opportunity for some publicity." Ritchie, he believes, is aware of the trade-off he's making. "A lot of longtime fans have said, 'Look, I can't do this anymore.' But he'll probably tell you, 'For every one that leaves, another three will come.' If you go through comments sections, you'll find a lot that are like, 'I didn't even like Kid Rock, didn't like his music, but damn if I'm not going to go to the shows and support this guy.'"

Ritchie has always had an intuitive understanding of marketing, promotion, and how to make money. He tells me that once Trump was in office and the vehemence of the opposition to him became clear, he realized it was risky to be so publicly supportive of him. "When I doubled down on it, I knew that could be a career ender," he says. "But I was betting that there were a lot of like-minded people out there." The bet paid off. Whatever he does now, he says, "half the country says, 'Fuck yeah!'"

Ritchie seems flattered that Trump has returned his affections. He rarely misses an opportunity to mention hanging out or golfing with the former president, and is quick to rise to his defense. When I bring up Trump's divisive rhetoric about immigrants, about Democrats, about nearly anyone who crosses him, Ritchie embraces this aspect of his character as a feature, not a bug.

"You think I like Trump because he's a nice guy?" he says. "I'm not electing the deacon of a church. That motherfucker likes to win. He likes to cheat in his fucking golf game. I want that guy on my team. I want the guy who goes, 'I'm going to fight with you.'"

Ultimately, his attachment to Trump feels more personal than ideological. Sure, he will parrot Fox News talking points about immigration, foreign policy, or the economy, but what he seems most drawn to in Trump as a rich, famous, attention-hungry loudmouth whose cartoonish persona was once universally celebrated but is now toxic to half the populace is a reflection that looks a lot like his own.

Several people I interviewed believe that as a business-minded, country-music-loving, stuck-in-his-ways conservative, Ritchie has essentially become what he once despised: his father. "I just don't think the apple ever falls far from the tree," says Clark.

Ritchie doesn't really disagree. "Man, the stereotypes are true. I turn into more of him every day."

The music Ritchie tells me he's been working on lately isn't political at all. He wants me to hear some, so after the Fox News hit, we climb into an ATV and he drives us down a steep hill, through the woods, about a half-mile to the large building that houses his home studio.

Ritchie can't find the right cable to connect his phone to the studio's sound system, so we go to a lounge area where he plays a couple of new country-tinged rock songs on his phone. This is about the point when shit starts going decidedly sideways.

For the first two hours that we talked, Ritchie seemed eager to argue politics, but I tried not to take the bait. Yeah, we got into it about trans rights ("I can coexist with anyone in a public space. I used to go to those clubs with them fuckers in New York. They were a hoot") and the 2020 election ("I'm going to say this on the record: It was stolen … by a bunch of fucking jackasses that voted for Joe Biden"), but for the most part, it didn't seem productive to shout at each other about things we were never going to agree on. Besides, debating Ritchie is maddening. He skips from topic to topic like he's flipping channels, and says intentionally outrageous shit in a way that it's never clear whether he's joking, serious, just trying to irritate you, or maybe all three. And he likes to do it all at high volume. This exchange was fairly typical:

RITCHIE: You can't stop evil, but you don't have to let them in so easily either. We want great fucking immigrants, people that want to come here, have a better life, work. They're Christians, if you're talking about Mexico.

ME: But when Trump says these people are—

RITCHIE: They are!

ME: … not humans.

RITCHIE: They're murderers! They're rapists! They are! MS-13! They just did the girl over here! They just did the girl in Nashville!

ME: Those are anecdotal. If you look at crime stats, immigrants commit crime at a much lower level than citizens.

RITCHIE: It only takes 10 of them!

ME: What?

RITCHIE: 9/11!

ME: Those are two different things.

RITCHIE: No, it's not! It only takes a few of them! Why can't we just have a system where we're going to vet you first—

ME: We have one!

RITCHIE: … then we're going to welcome you and help you out! I have no problem spending my tax dollars on that.

ME: When Trump gets up and talks about immigrants as rapists and animals, that creates an environment where the guy who came across the border running from violence or trying to support his family is now treated like shit.

RITCHIE: So, with that thinking, you'd say gangsta rap is contributing to all these young Black men shooting each other and going to jail.

ME: How are those things equivalent?

To be fair, Ritchie could just as quickly downshift, turn on the charm, and dish up self-deprecating stories or offer me earnest advice about my finances or my girlfriend. But once we're sitting in the lounge, all he wants to do is squabble.

By this time, I've long since quit drinking, but Ritchie has exchanged his white wine for Jim Beam and Diet Coke. He proceeds to drain at least three or four of them

AL PEREIRA/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

in pretty quick succession. He's sitting in a dark leather chair, shouting at me about something or other, when he reaches behind the seat, pulls out a black handgun, and waves it around to make some sort of point.

"And I got a fucking goddamn gun right here if I need it!" he shouts. "I got them everywhere!"

This was the tenor of the next hour or so. We start talking about American history, and he rightfully brings up slavery and the genocide of Native Americans as stains on that history. I ask him if he worries that in the modern day he might be on the wrong side of history.

"No. It was the Republicans that freed the fucking slaves!"

"Yes, but the Republicans were the progressive party back then."

"I know where you're going with this, and I'll tell you why I don't," Ritchie says. "Because Trick Trick, the hardest-hitting n----r in Detroit, was like, 'Dog, you had that shit right. We need Trump.' I'll call him right fucking now." He dials his phone, but Christian Mathis, the pioneering underground Detroit rapper who goes by Trick Trick, doesn't pick up. Ritchie turns back to me. "I'm telling you. These dogs are calling me like, 'Yo, n----r, you had that one right!'" (Mathis didn't respond to subsequent messages asking for confirmation of his support for Trump.)

It's worth mentioning these are not the only times Ritchie drops the n-word during my visit. It'd be easy to label this as the rantings of a drunk racist, but as with everything that Ritchie does, it's hard to know how calculated it all is. Is he just trying to get a reaction? Is he begging to be pilloried when this story comes out so he can launch into a very public tirade against "cancel culture"? Is this all just a play for more attention? Would any of that make it less shitty?

The strange thing is, despite his rhetoric, Ritchie's politics aren't uniformly regressive. He considers himself socially liberal. And the longer we argue, the more I can see the faint outlines of reasonable stances on things like immigration, government regulation of corporations, and tax policy. But here's the thing: Nobody will ever hear any of that over the shouting, the name-calling, and all of his other attention-grabbing bullshit. I don't think he really cares because the shouting, the name-calling, and the attention-grabbing bullshit are who he is now. It's as if the blurry line between Kid Rock and Bob Ritchie has disappeared entirely.

One theory several people I interviewed offered is that Ritchie's right-wing awakening is as much about managing the emotional fallout of a waning career as it is about any deep-seated beliefs. He's always longed for the spotlight, and now, as a 53-year-old more than a decade removed from his last big hit, he's doing whatever he can to keep it on him. Although he remains a big live draw, when you're accustomed to the endorphin hit that comes with being at the white-hot center of pop culture, you may find playing a casino in Sacramento or the fairgrounds in Gonzales doesn't provide the same rush. That's not to say Kid Rock's politics don't reflect Bob Ritchie's beliefs, but yelling them so loudly feels performative. The real question is whether he's satisfied doing that.

At one point in the evening, the MAGA veil falls for a moment, and he seems to lament becoming such a reviled figure among so many music fans. "No one's ever going to say, 'Fuck Prince,'" he tells me. "As soon as he goes" — and here, Ritchie breaks into song — "'I never meant to cause you any sorrow,' you're like, '*Ahh!*'"

"Yeah, but Prince wasn't out talking shit about everyone, spouting political opinions."

"I don't care. 'Purple Rain' is probably the greatest Prince song ever written. Prince is known for 'Purple Rain.' I'm known for shooting up Bud Light cans!"

"But do you want that? You don't want that to be your epitaph."

"I don't care."

"Yeah, but you do."

"No, I don't. You don't understand. I really don't give a fuck."

"If that was true, you wouldn't go on Laura Ingraham. You wouldn't talk to me."

He tells me that's just business. If he can make "shit tons more money," he can give it to friends, family, his band, and to the MD Anderson Cancer Center, which took care of his father when he was sick.

"But it's not about money anymore, right?" I ask him. "You've got money."

"Finances make a lot of decisions."

"I get that, but my whole point is whether you want to be the guy on Fox News or whether you want to be remembered for the music."

"Fox News," he says, deadpan. Then he laughs.

I shrug, thank him for meeting with me and tell him I've got to go. I need to be back in Atlanta tonight, and have a four-hour drive ahead of me.

"No, you don't," he tells me. "You can stay."

"Really, I've got to go."

"You can crash here tonight. I've got room for you."

"I appreciate it, but I can't."

"Well, you need me to drive you to the house."

This is true. My car is at least a half-mile away, up a steep hill, through unfamiliar woods, and by now, it's dark outside. "Well, I can walk if I have to, but, yeah, it would be nice if you could give me a ride back."

"You won't make it," Ritchie snarls. "Just watch this one YouTube video and then I'll take you up there." After some fidgeting with the remote, he loads a video of himself performing "Born Free" at a 2011 charity event onto the flatscreen in the lounge. The audience at the show includes Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, George H.W. Bush, and George W. Bush.

"Don't you miss being that guy?" I ask him.

"No. I can do that any day of the week."

"Not anymore. Because you couldn't be in a room with—"

"I don't give a frog's fat fuck! Look around. I got a butler named Uncle Tom. Do I look like I give a fuck?"

When the video ends, I stand up to go, but he wants to watch another one. And then another one after that. This goes on for more than half an hour — me telling him I need to leave, him insisting on watching just one more video, all while goading me into arguments about Gaza, Trump, whatever. He pulls an acoustic guitar off the wall and plays along with shaky fan footage of himself performing "Maggie May." I start to wonder if I'll ever get home. Finally, I pick up my backpack.

"OK, I'm out."

Ritchie shakes his head. "You'll just stay over."

"I can't. I really have to go."

"All right. This is the last one we'll watch."

"No, the last one was the last one."

"This one is the final final. That's what my dad used to say, the final final."

"I've got to go."

"You can't get anywhere without me."

"I've got legs. I can make it up the hill. I'm leaving."

I start walking toward the door.

"Sit down."

"No."

"One more and that's it."

"You said that 10 fucking minutes ago!"

"Final final. You haven't even asked me about my jewelry."

He shoves his hands toward me. He's got heavily jeweled rings on two fingers. One says "D," the other "KR."

"Detroit and Kid Rock," I say, pointing at each of them. "Can I go now?"

Ritchie mixes himself another drink and starts picking up the threads of arguments we started hours ago. He calls me a "college snowflake." He asks how much money I made last year, and when I tell him, he tells me I need a new job. Then he complains about his tax dollars supporting "Black women having children they can't afford."

"Look," I tell him, "there are people who abuse the system but—"

"We call those Black people. Would you agree?"

"No."

"So, you don't like Black people?"

"I don't think Black people abuse the system."

"You hate Black people?"

At this point, I don't know whether he believes anything he's saying, or if he just wants to keep me there fighting with him. By now, we're chest to chest and he's up in my face, but I think I can detect a sly smile creeping from the corner of his mouth. He's just baiting me, but I'm surprised at how dedicated he is to the task. Is he lonely, or just bored? It's not as if he's holed up in his giant mansion, Norma Desmond-style. He's got people around — among others, his manager, his long-term fiancée, Audrey Berry, and, of course, Uncle Tom — but I get the feeling what he wants isn't companionship but a sparring partner.

"All right, take me home, man. We're not getting anywhere with this. You just fucking love to argue."

"No."

After another five or 10 minutes of this back-and-forth, he finally seems to lose steam and agrees to drive me back to my car. As he pours himself one more drink for the road, he looks me up and down.

"Do you think you could whup the shit out of me?" he asks.

I laugh. "Probably not."

"You can take a shot if you want."

"No, thanks. I'm good."

As we ride up the dark hill, he's quiet — well, not exactly quiet, but quieter. He's still needling me, but his heart's not in it anymore. We turn out of the woods, in sight of his gargantuan house, and he asks me what I think of everything he's built on his property. "Do you think it's cool or excessive?"

I glance at him, and he suddenly seems strangely vulnerable. As much as I find so much about who Bob Ritchie has become highly problematic, at that moment, I'm worried about hurting his feelings.

"I think you've created your playground," I tell him. "This is what you wanted."

"So, you like it?"

"I like it. It's fun. If I had $240 million, I don't know if I would've done the same."

"I have $370 million in cash."

"All right. I don't want to shortchange you."

He stops the ATV. I get out and we shake hands. Then he motions for me to come close, as if he has a secret he wants to tell me.

"Would you do me a favor?" he asks, practically whispering. "Just write the most horrific article about me. Do it. It helps me."

I walk toward my car, and just before I get to it, he calls out one more time.

"Will you tell everyone that I was halfway cool?"

I tell him he's all right, we just disagree about lots of things.

"That's because you're gay," he says cackling, as I climb into my car and start the long drive home.

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DANCE MUSIC'S LOW-KEY LEGEND

PRIDE NOW

Kaytranada's forward-thinking production has subtly shifted the sound of pop culture, even if he's too humble to admit it

BY JEFF IHAZA

PHOTOGRAPHS BY XAVIER SCOTT MARSHALL

*

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PRIDE NOW

THE AVERAGE HIGH temperature in Quebec City in March is 33 degrees Fahrenheit, with a low of around 18. That's apparently of no consequence to the locals, who have chosen the month for an outdoor music festival appropriately dubbed Igloofest. The annual event, billed as "the coldest music festival in the world," is an opportunity for Québécois music lovers to flex their winter gear, with revelers in full-body ski suits, snow goggles, and what appears to be the most advanced outdoor apparel on the market.

Kaytranada, this year's headliner, arrives backstage around 8 p.m. wearing black Celine sweatpants and Balenciaga wraparound sunglasses. He's flanked on either side by his mom and sister, as well as a bevy of crew members trailing as he heads toward the main stage for his set. While he's well-known as a maestro of dance floors across the world, he tells me later on that he's only recently started working regularly with CDJs, a standard tool used by live DJs to play digital music in their sets. "I just got tired of carrying my laptop around," he says. "I wanted to look more like a DJ."

Onstage, you'd never guess he had any doubts about his position as a selector. Somewhere between a traditional DJ set and a live performance, his set at Igloofest races through his catalog as both a producer and solo artist, all to a raucous response from the crowd, which explodes in cheers at every beat drop. Despite the high-profile occasion, Kaytranada — one of Canada's most famous musicians not named Celine, Abel, or Aubrey — is as laid-back as ever. He moves with a sense of familiarity, the local legend showing love to the folks who got him here. "This is the most Canadian thing," he says backstage. "Like, to see all this snow, and people also just not giving a fuck."

After celebratory drinks backstage with the other Igloofest performers — DJs Sango and Kitty Ca$h, as well as Kay's younger brother, who raps under the name Lou Phelps — Kaytranada tells me how, lately, he's found himself balancing a range of expectations, all while trying to make music that still feels true to him. He says that his third full-length album, *Timeless*, which he'll go on to drop in early June, takes its inspiration from Eighties New Wave, a decidedly left-field turn for a musician known for forward-thinking club bangers.

He says he decided to delete his Twitter, now known as X, because the comments from fans telling him who to collaborate with next, while well-meaning, became frustrating. "People are like 'Oh, my gosh, you need to work with this artist. Is Beyoncé on your album? Is Tyler on your album?'" he says, now in his dressing room, clutching a glass of wine close to 1 a.m. "It's like people are trying to choose for me what my album should sound like, and that would drive me crazy."

"I always used to be very shy in the studio. It took me a while to understand, OK, I got to be the one that says 'Do it like this.' I'm learning to do that now."

Still, you can't blame people for asking. Over the course of his career, Kaytranada has enlivened the rap and R&B atmosphere with pointed reminders of the fact that music is supposed to make you dance. He arrived in the 2010s like a missing link between Black music's past and present, capable of fostering a seamless blend between a new generation of artists and the traditions that came before. Kaytranada's stuttering, near-syncopated drum rhythms take their inspiration from the Haitian dance genre compas, while infusing the sound with traditional hip-hop and R&B rhythms.

After a string of popular remixes and SoundCloud edits, his 2016 debut, *99.9%*, established him as an auteur-level producer, not unlike Madlib and J Dilla, who Kay tells me were his inspirations growing up. Released as a one-off on the indie powerhouse XL, the album introduced Kaytranada's sound — replete with two-step rhythms and swinging, undulating drums — to the masses. The single "You're the One," featuring the Internet's Syd, remains a classic: a hit so textured and innovative that it feels like it will never age. Kay's debut album also set off a spree of more mainstream collaborations and, ultimately, a major-label deal at RCA.

With the Grammy-winning *Bubba*, released three years later, Kaytranada's brand of dance-infused R&B took off. The album represented a shift in collaborations for the producer, who up to that point was content sending beats to artists and working with whatever they sent back. This time, Kaytranada took over the driver's seat, working in-studio with left-of-center pop voices like Charlotte Day Wilson, Tinashe, and Kali Uchis. When it comes to collaborators, it's never about picking the biggest name, but simply finding an artist whose sound meshes with Kay's creations. Even so, he says, taking control hasn't always felt natural.

"I think I'm kind of shy," he tells me. "I always used to be very shy in the studio and sometimes let the artists just do their thing because I didn't want to correct them or anything. It took me a while to understand, OK, I got to be the one that says 'Do it like this.' I don't have a leader mentality. I'm learning to do that now."

Bubba would go on to earn Kay the award for Best Dance/Electronic Album at the 2021 Grammys, an accolade that apparently flipped a switch for the musician, who shortly after made the decision to relocate to Los Angeles. "Montreal is not a celebrity town, but I get a celebrity treatment," he says. "It doesn't make me feel like myself." He contrasts this with L.A., where "I could be in a room and there'll be six other celebrities. That makes me more comfortable, like all eyes are not on me."

PREVIOUS SPREAD: OUTFIT BY HELMUT LANG. JEWELRY, WORN THROUGHOUT, BY BERNARD JAMES, MARTINE ALI, AND MM6 MAISON.

Kaytranada grew up in Saint-Hubert, just outside of Montreal. A middle child in the family, he showed musical talent early on. After he graduated high school, he was invited to a beat competition called Artbeat Montreal, which he ended up winning. Soon after, he'd make a name for himself playing shows around his hometown alongside his brother. They started out as a classic rapper-producer duo and went by the name the Celestics, a play on their last name, Celestin. (Kaytranada's first name is Louis, but he goes by his middle name, Kevin; his brother, Louis-Phillipe, goes by Lou.)

It didn't take long for Kay's beats to be recognized as coming from somewhere out of this planet. Even among the EDM-centric pop production of the 2010s, something about his sound stood apart. There was a more energetic swing, a syncopation rooted in history, an irresistible danceability. Before long, he was the main event, playing local clubs and parties around Canada.

Kaytranada's parents, who had emigrated from Port-au-Prince, Haiti, when he was a toddler, shared a musical sensibility. His mother sang in a choir, and his father was an avid musician and audiophile. Kay says his dad had a big sound system in their house growing up, complete with a record player and DJ mixer. He'd hear tunes from legends like Bob Marley, Michael Jackson, and Lionel Richie alongside the traditional Haitian music his father grew up with. Kay's two older sisters were another important influence. "My big sisters were always playing music around, and that's how I really fell in love with hip-hop," he says. "They had the keys to all the good music. I was exposed to a lot of great hip-hop music from the '97-'98 era."

As he started to experiment with the nascent digital-production tools that emerged in the early 2000s, Kaytranada got much of his inspiration from J Dilla, whose intricately chopped samples might be his clearest point of comparison. "I really studied Dilla," he says. "Instead of studying for school, I studied his music — him and Madlib were producers where I was just trying to understand how they would chop a sample. Dilla would do those micro-chops that don't make any sense, but sound like a big beautiful collage. I got so inspired by that. I had a phase where I was just remaking his beats when I was, like, 15, remaking *Donuts*."

Kaytranada started making music with his younger brother around the same time. "We had the microphone that came with a PC, and an audio recorder that could record 30 seconds of voice," he says. "We would play an instrumental from a 50 Cent website, and just rap over it and make full songs. I always wanted that for us, to have a career as a Gang Starr type of thing. The producer and the MC."

The pair released their debut project as the Celestics, titled *Massively Massive*, in 2011. But it soon became clear that Kaytranada's production was taking off on a different level. "I think we went separate ways because I got too successful with the electronic things I was doing, and that was not easy for both of us," he says. "People were bringing up 'Kaytranada and his brother.' My brother really didn't like that. I didn't really appreciate it either. I just wanted us to be called a duo."

Looking back, Kay adds, his brother "was the leader of things. He was calling the shots. And for me to become the person that everybody's looking at, it was not that easy." Eventually

THIS AND THE FOLLOWING SPREAD: OUTFIT BY VERSACE.

they came to the decision to split up the group. Kay would still produce for his brother, but the dream of a Gang Starr-like duo would have to wait. While Kay's career was taking off, the tension lingered in the background until around 2020, when both came to a better understanding of what had happened.

"Honestly, it was kind of like a dagger to the heart," his brother Lou tells me later. "Me being young, I was like 'Why aren't you bringing me?' And he was like, 'Man, I got to do my own thing. You got to blow up by yourself too.'"

THE NIGHT BEFORE Igloofest, I join Kaytranada and the rest of the festival lineup at Elena, an Italian restaurant in Montreal's Saint-Henri neighborhood, for a pre-show link-up. Sango, another local talent, who notably collaborated with Frank Ocean on a set of remixes in 2019, is scheduled to play a show later that night in the city. Kitty Ca$h, a Brooklyn-based producer and DJ, also has a show this evening, setting the stage for a busy night out.

At dinner, over cacio e pepe and Caesar salad, Kay and his brother have an undeniable familial chemistry, and it's easy to pick up on Kay's sense that Lou was the leader. Where Kaytranada is shy and reserved, his brother — who looks just like him — is jovial and outgoing. Outside the restaurant, as we sort out which cars everyone is traveling in, a fan comes up to Lou to shake his hand and offer his appreciation for his music. In another life, the tables might have been turned, and Kaytranada would've been the one behind the scenes.

"In my heart, I always wanted to be the producer, but the Kaytranada thing just ... I wouldn't say got out of control," he says. "More like, 'Oh, that really works. Continue with that.'"

In 2016, Kaytranada came out of the closet, giving an in-depth interview to *The Fader* ahead of the release of his debut. "I still don't think many people know that I'm gay. Even with that story," he jokingly tells me. "Freddie Gibbs was one of the first artists that was like 'I'm proud of you, man, keep doing your thing.' I thought that was crazy. That gave me hope."

"I still don't think many people know that I'm gay," he jokes. "Freddie Gibbs was one of the first artists that was like, 'I'm proud of you.' That gave me hope."

He says that while he knows hip-hop at large still has issues with homophobia, a lot has changed in the years since he first came out. "Now, we got Lil Nas X and rappers from the LGBT community just coming out. R&B artists, too," he says. "It's more acceptable and more welcome. I heard Snoop and Dr. Dre were performing at Pride in L.A. That's crazy."

After dinner, we head to Sango's show at a club called Newspeak. The venue is on the top floor of an industrial-style building, and by the time we arrive, Sango is already busy rearranging bodies on the dance floor with an eclectic mix of amapiano, R&B, and house that make his friendship with Kaytranada seem instinctive. Sango finds connections that only seem to make sense on a dance floor. At one point in the night, Justin Timberlake's hit "Rock Your Body" booms through the speakers before somehow blending perfectly into an Afrobeats track.

After the show ends on the earlier side, around 11, we head to the apartment of one of Kay's friends, a local club owner and promoter, to hang out before Kitty Ca$h's set later in the night. In the car on the way, Kay and Lou sit in the back seat riffing about hip-hop. At one point the subject of Kanye West comes up, and both Kay and Lou agree that he remains one of the most influential musicians of all time and that his most recent antics are a disappointing continuation of traits he's shown throughout his career.

Later on, at the apartment, the conversation turns to 4Batz, the fast-rising R&B crooner who got a cosign from Drake, as well as lots of industry-plant accusations. My skepticism about his music is quickly shot down by the party's guests, though I'm pretty sure I get a tacit nod of agreement from Kay, who later tells me that he wonders where he fits in today's landscape. "I'm not in the standards of pop music. So that would mess with my head a lot," he says. "In my less-confident days, I'd be like, damn, it's kind of hard to just be yourself in this game because you want to bring something new."

He plays me an unreleased track he made with the rapper Mach-Hommy, rumors of which have floated around the rap internet for some time now. (A few weeks later, it will pop up as the first single and title track from Mach's new album, *#RICHAXXHAITIAN*.) It slaps. Mach, known for his gritty raps and his anti-fame attitude, is both an unlikely and obvious collaborator for Kaytranada. Each musician is rooted in a DIY ethos, and both infuse their music with their shared Haitian heritage. "A lot of people don't know the shit that he did on the house-music shit," Kay says. "He raps on a lot of house joints, and it sounds so effortless and nice. He was showing me the house joints, and I was in shock, like, 'What the fuck?'"

Kay got inspired to explore a new sound of his own in 2022, while he was on tour with the Weeknd. "I don't know what got into me, but I ended up doing six demos with my own vocals, me singing," he says. One of those demos, called "Stepped On," made his new album. "I was really writing this song for the Weeknd, technically," he adds. "But then it sounded nice to hear me singing on the song."

He says he's thinking about doing a full project as a vocalist next. "It's probably going to be a different moniker, but it's going to be Kaytranada production on my own vocals," he says. What appeals to him about this direction is the sense of artistic freedom it offers. "The New Wave and the grunge era, people did not have the best voices, but they made amazing music," he says. "This is just simply art, and it's how I feel."

Timeless has been years in the making. Kay tells me he recorded most of the songs around the time he received the Grammy in 2021. He's got a song with Childish Gambino that he recorded in this same period, as well as features from Teyana Taylor, Anderson .Paak, SiR, and Channel Tres. "It's not big, big names," he says, "but it's definitely artists that I love to work with."

Kay tells me that there are "so many things that changed since the last album," most notably the technology he's been able to use. He briefly geeks out over new sampling techniques made possible by AI. "There's this song called 'Seemingly' where I sampled this Don Blackman record, and I'm just playing around the keys," he says. "Now that I have the AI stems of it, I'm just breaking down the bass, and the keys, and the vocals to it. And the drums are crazy. If the AI couldn't exist, I would not even think about sampling this record. [But] now I can mute the drums, and I can have space to add my own drums and make my own beat with that."

He says he's still inspired by the sounds he grew up hearing as a kid, the so-called shiny-suit era of hip-hop. "A lot of hip-hop heads are discrediting it, but for me, it's still an era where they would sample a lot of Studio 54-type disco songs, and then slow them down, and then just freak them a little bit," he says. "I have this song with my brother where it's this disco sample. It reminds me of that era, like the 'Mo Money Mo Problems' music video, it kind of gives that vibe."

The collaboration with his brother will mark the first time they've been on a track together since the days of the Celestics. "It's been a long time waiting," Kay says. "My mom's been mad for a while."

Lou says he's thrilled the collab is finally happening, but more important, that his brother is entering this new phase in his life and career. "I can't say he wasn't confident, but he was so shy and so reserved that he would never allow himself to make decisions," Lou says. "He would always consider other people in his decisions. But now he's just a boss. You can tell he knows who he is. He knows his power. He knows the importance that he has on the community, and on the people around him."

After Igloofest, it is somehow snowing even more. The streets are caked in powder as we head to the afterparty in a cab. Anywhere else, I'm sure this amount of snow would make for a slow night at a club, but not in Quebec. At the packed-out venue, Kay and his brother jump on the decks, teaming up like when they were kids. This, too, feels natural. "We both got into our passions at the same time," Kay says. "So us DJ'ing together is ... I don't know how to explain. It's just easy." ®

STYLING BY VON FORD AT THE WALL GROUP. GROOMING BY ALEXA HERNANDEZ AT THE WALL GROUP USING TOM FORD BEAUTY. SET DESIGN BY ANNIKA FISCHER. PRODUCTION MANAGER: MIABELLA CHAVEZ. LIGHTING TECHNICIAN: DOMINIQUE ELLIS. DIGITAL TECHNICIAN: RAMON FELIX. PHOTOGRAPHY ASSISTANCE: ANGEL CASTRO. STYLING ASSISTANCE: BRANDON YAMADA. PHOTOGRAPHED AT DUST STUDIOS.

PRIDE NOW

FLIPPING THE SCRIPT IN HORROR

Jane Schoenbrun grew up obsessed with pop culture, and now they're helping to redefine it

BY BRENNA EHRLICH

WHEN JANE SCHOENBRUN was in high school, they spent hours devouring *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Schoenbrun watched Sarah Michelle Gellar play Buffy, who over the course of seven seasons, figures out who she really is — a powerful woman chosen to fight evil forces. And Schoenbrun imagined how they might fit into the show. They saw themselves in everyone, from the wacky pal Xander to the broody vampire Angel to Willow and Tara, a pair of witches in love — gender be damned.

"If you'd told me I could press a button and become a cool, goth, queer girl, I would have been like, 'Give me the button. I want to press the button,'" Schoenbrun tells me. "But it would take me 20 years to understand that that was literally all that it took to be trans: that desire. I was always trans, but there was no one and no media at the time that told me that that was in any way possible."

Now, at age 37, the trans and nonbinary writer-director is making movies that speak to who they were in high school — movies that explore the intricacies of identity through the lens of horror without pandering or oversimplifying. Schoenbrun's latest film, *I Saw the TV Glow*, out this spring, is a kind of allegory for the trans experience that asks viewers "What's more dangerous: Folding yourself into an identity that doesn't fit — or burning it all down and reforming yourself from the ashes?"

"When you are 12 and lonely, it becomes a coping mechanism to go looking for [magic] in media and in fiction," Schoenbrun says.

Schoenbrun is helping to usher in a whole new wave of the horror genre, one where a previously underrepresented community can truly see themselves on the screen. Horror has long been seen as a largely male, cisgendered art form — at least on the surface. Think half-clad co-eds getting the ax while the virginal Final Girl makes it to the sequel.

But there have always been queer undertones in scary stories, explains Heather O. Petrocelli, author of *Queer for Fear: Horror Film and the Queer Spectator*. "Queerness and the horror genre are inexorably linked, starting with the Gothic literature of queer writers, such as Mary Shelley, Oscar Wilde, and Bram Stoker, and then furthered by gay horror directors like James Whale and F.W. Murnau," Petrocelli says. Rather than the heteronormative leads, folks could sympathize with Frankenstein's monster and his quest for identity — or the queer-coded Dracula.

This kind of closeted representation was less than ideal — as were later visions of non-cisgender identity in horror (see cross-dressing serial killers, like Buffalo Bill from *Silence of the Lambs*). The Nineties and early aughts ushered in more equal-opportunity bloodfests, with both sexy male and female victims, and recent years have seen increasingly better representation when it comes to all sexualities and identities. Now, Petrocelli says, we're at a kind of final frontier: the trans experience.

Schoenbrun grew up in Westchester, New York, where parents raised their kids in the right neighborhood to become anything they wanted to be — as long as it was a doctor or lawyer or U.S. president. "I'm pretty sure they weren't talking about becoming a girl who makes goth movies about how terrible late-stage-capitalist suburban adolescence was," Schoenbrun quips. And although they had friends as a kid, Schoenbrun was terrified of dating; they knew they liked girls, but they didn't want to flirt in the way that boys did. They wanted to become best friends with their crushes, listening to sad music and watching their favorite films.

Looking for a refuge, Schoenbrun told stories — whether it was making up episodes of favorite TV shows, playing Dungeons & Dragons, or filming zombie movies with their friends on a camcorder they got for Hanukkah. And through it all, they found solace in fiction: horror flicks like *Evil Dead II*, campy sci-fi like *The X-Files*, and, most of all, *Buffy*.

"My love of *Buffy* was a coping mechanism for not being able to find and express love in the real world," they say.

When they started their filmmaking career, Schoenbrun made their mark with films that delved into identity and internet culture — notably the 2018 documentary *A Self-Induced Hallucination*, about Slender Man, a creepy pretend creature that kidnaps and terrorizes children. First appearing more than a decade ago, the skinny, faceless figure in a suit became an internet meme as people online wrote their own stories about him and his devious deeds. But in 2014, two preteen girls stabbed their friend and left her for dead as a real offering to the fictional being. (One of the girls was released in 2021, while the other remains in a mental institution.)

Schoenbrun became fascinated with Slender Man and his powerful lore. "Contributors would never break character, they would never admit that the experiences they were recounting were fictional," they wrote in *Filmmaker Magazine* in 2018. "This allowed contributors and participants to immerse themselves, to live for a while in the fictional worlds they had invented together." Schoenbrun later erased the documentary from Vimeo, not wanting to profit off of tragedy, but they were fascinated by how the internet blurred reality and fiction.

"I remember wishing that magic was real as a kid," they tell me. "When you're 12 and lonely, it becomes a coping mechanism to go looking for that in media and in fiction." As a kid, they spent ample time on message boards themselves, trading theories and even manufacturing their own spoilers for their favorite shows — some of which spread through communities as truth. "It was never like, 'I'm just a fan,'" they say. "It was like, 'I am a fan and I am obsessed with this, but I also want to get under the hood and tinker around.'"

Their experience with the Slender Man documentary led, in part, to Schoenbrun's breakout, 2021's *We're All Going to the World's Fair*, an eerie look at suburban malaise through the eyes of an internet-obsessed teen who decides to take a nightmarish viral challenge. It premiered two years after Schoenbrun came out to themselves in 2019. The main character, Casey, is a lot like teenage Schoenbrun: Disenchanted by her mundane

Schoenbrun at the Sundance Film Festival in January

MICHAEL BUCKNER FOR DEADLINE

life, the girl aims to blur the lines between fiction and reality, creating her own creepy narrative. The tension arises, though, when an older man grows concerned about Casey, trying to "save" her from herself — against Casey's wishes. The horror is in that grab at control, not the game.

"As Casey says in that film, 'I love horror movies, and I thought it might be cool to try actually living in one,'" Schoenbrun says. "The porousness of what is and what is not real as a kid is more fluid. It's easier to get lost in that magic."

I Saw the TV Glow — which Schoenbrun wrote just a few months after changing their name and going on hormones — keeps to that same tradition. It follows two outcasts, Maddy (Brigette Lundy-Paine) and Owen (Justice Smith), as they become increasingly obsessed with a show called *The Pink Opaque,* which centers around a pair of magically bonded teens, Isabel (Helena Howard) and Tara (Lindsey Jordan, a.k.a. the musician Snail Mail). Stylistically, it's a mashup of quirky Nineties programs like *Are You Afraid of the Dark?, The Adventures of Pete & Pete*, and, of course, *Buffy*. Skating a fine line between fantasy and delusion, the film sees Maddy going missing after becoming increasingly obsessed with the show — which is preferable to her crappy home life. When she shows up years later claiming that she's been living inside *The Pink Opaque* as Tara, Owen is torn about whether or not he thinks she's telling the truth — and if he wants to join her there. Does he really believe in that kind of mixing and melding of reality? Or will he live out the rest of his life in the suburbs?

For Schoenbrun, who sees themselves in both characters, Owen represents "not seeing the glow in you and all of the ways that we cope with that pre-transition — and that all of the ways that that coping is ultimately insufficient." Maddy's journey, then, was "absolutely me reflecting on the defiance necessary to begin my transition. I think of it as a prison-break movie," they add. The film also features Limp Bizkit's Fred Durst as Owen's father, as well as cameos from *Buffy*'s Amber Benson, *Pete & Pete* stars Danny Tamberelli and Michael Marona, and Phoebe Bridgers.

Lundy-Paine also found kindred spirits in Owen and Maddy — especially the former character. Now 29, Lundy-Paine came out as nonbinary 10 years ago. While they came from a "very queer family" and didn't face the same kind of prejudices that Schoenbrun saw in the post-*Ellen* Nineties, they're very aware of what a rough process coming out can be. "I think about Owen all the time, especially when it comes to transition," they tell me over Zoom; unlike Maddy, who lives in almost a constant state of rage, Lundy-Paine is Zen-calm. "It feels like it's too late for him. I feel like that sometimes. Because transition is a process that has so many steps, and so much regression, and so much fear. The fear doesn't go away. But I do believe that there's always still time, and that it's always a process."

To prepare for the film, Schoenbrun lent Lundy-Paine their *Buffy* DVDs — a passing of the torch from millennial to Gen Z. At first, Lundy-Paine thought the show was "cringe," much like how Owen sees *The Pink Opaque* when he rewatches it as an adult. When Lundy-Paine got to Season Six, however, which heavily inspired *I Saw the TV Glow,* they began to understand why Schoenbrun has every episode title memorized. That season features Buffy returning from the dead after her friends set out to rescue her from hell — only to discover she was in heaven all along. An episode from that season sticks with Schoenbrun today: "Normal Again," which sees Buffy in a mental hospital, convinced her life thus far has been a delusion (thanks to some potent demon venom). "There are shades of that, for sure, in *TV Glow,*" Schoenbrun says. "The idea of entering fiction to cope with reality."

Schoenbrun actually enters the fiction of her own film — at least symbolically — in the form of Tara and Isabel's matching tattoos: a ghost with glasses that look a bit like Schoenbrun's own distinctive frames. That image came to Schoenbrun in the shower one day. "I remember at the time I was thinking a lot about the person I had been — and the movie as this elegy for poor, repressed Jane," Schoenbrun says. "The ghost with glasses was a symbol of this fragile figure who was not yet ready to step into life."

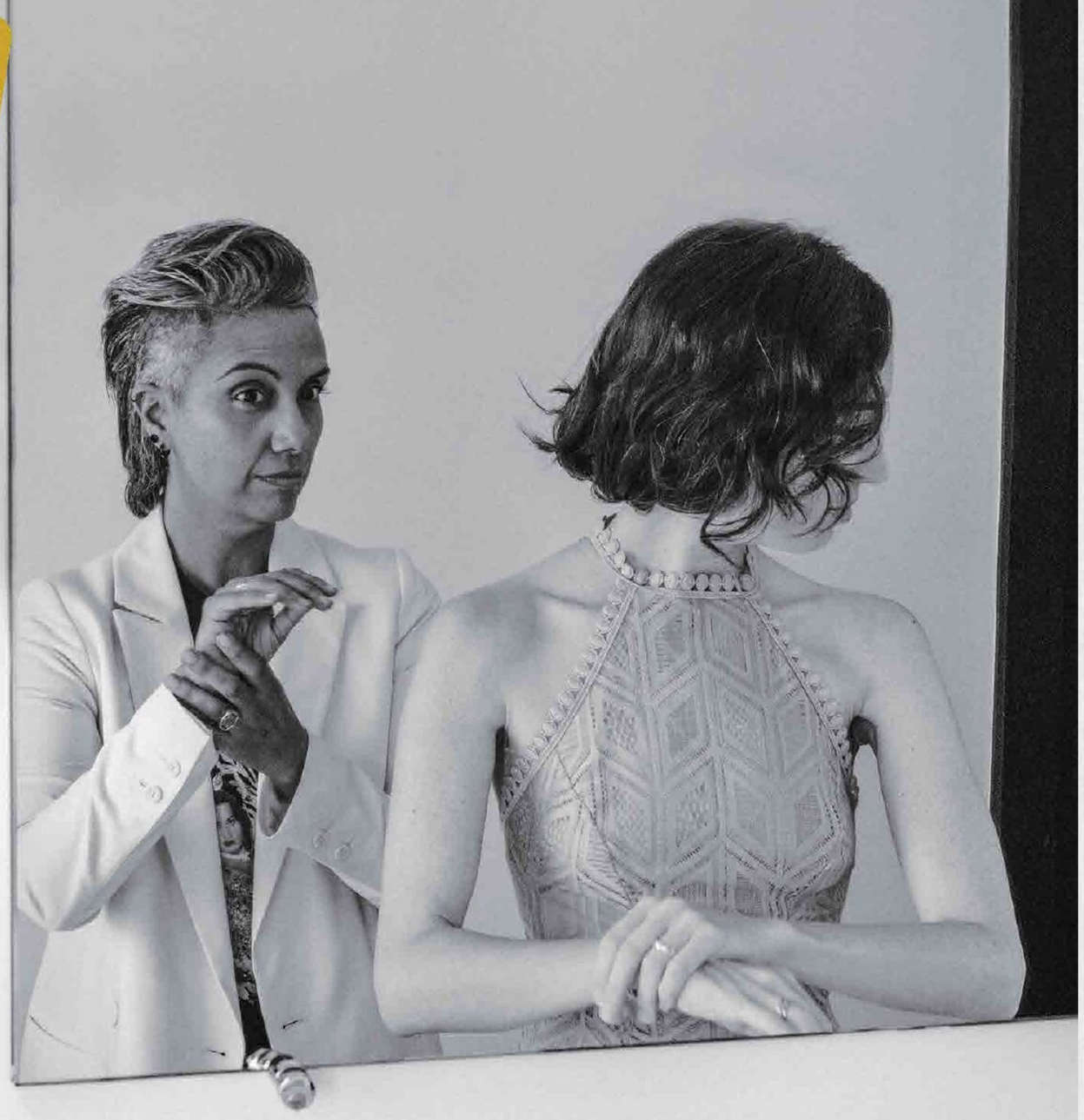
Now, though, with their second major film racking up rave reviews and audiences finding themselves in both Owen and Maddy, it seems Schoenbrun has finally taken those first steps. And they've finally become the person that they once dreamed of: that cool, queer goth making horror films — movies where other lost teens might be able to find a home. ®

PRIDE NOW

A NEW KIND OF POWER COUPLE

In 2020, when Billie and I started imagining a book about prominent LGBTQ+ couples, we were shocked it didn't exist yet. So we started with a definition: Anyone in this book would be out, partnered, and influential in mainstream culture. And as we began this work — the day after our wedding — we realized it didn't yet exist because living at the intersection of those three things was a relatively new experience. After four years and dozens of interviews and photo shoots, our book — *Queer Power Couples: On Love and Possibility* — explores that reality through 14 couples across generations. "There's still not a lot of maps for queer experiences," Mike Hadreas of Perfume Genius told us. But each couple played a role in making queer lives more visible — making new maps for those coming after them.

Adapted from ***Queer Power Couples: On Love and Possibility***. Written by **Hannah Murphy Winter** and photographed by **Billie Winter**.



Fawzia Mirza & Andria Wilson Mirza

Growing up, the only South Asian representation Fawzia saw on TV was Apu on *The Simpsons*. Now, as filmmakers, she and her wife, Andria, can give audiences what they never had. "I get messages from people all the time that are like, 'I never saw a queer Muslim person until you,' and I was like, 'I didn't either!'" Fawzia says. "Celebrating our love outside of the system that won't accept us — it took me my whole life to get there....
And yet we are thriving."

Steven Norfleet & Anthony Hemingway

Many of the couples who spoke with us shared the long journey between being in the closet and being a visible couple. Norfleet and Hemingway, who met after church in Los Angeles, were no different. Hemingway was "basically a preacher's kid," he says, so coming out to his mom when he was 25 was daunting. "I gave her a hug, and I was like, 'Mom, I'm gay. I hope you still love me.' And she pulled me tighter and uttered the words, verbatim: 'Of course I love you. You're who God made you to be.'"

Alan Wyffels & Michael Alden Hadreas (Perfume Genius)

As a teen in the Nineties, Hadreas looked for evidence of queerness everywhere he could. That's why he and Wyffels are so aware of their own visibility. "I've always loved that our relationship has been something that people could look up to," Wyffels says. "We get a lot of feedback from people being like, 'You guys give me so much hope that I'll be able to find something like you have someday.'"

Debbie Millman & Roxane Gay

One of the questions we asked each couple was how they relate to being visible, queer role models. They all felt the weight and the newness of that responsibility — but they weren't uniformly enthusiastic. "I'd prefer not to be visible," Gay was quick to say, "but I think that everyone has responsibilities in a functional society, and if this is one of those responsibilities, then so be it."

BILLIE WINTER, 4

MEET THE FEARLESS TRANS PRO SURFER

Sasha Jane Lowerson is a world-class athlete, winning multiple longboarding titles. Since her 2020 transition, she's helped make surfing more inclusive, even while some in the sport are resistant to change

BY MILES KLEE

Watching Sasha Jane Lowerson paddle out into the chilly Pacific, it becomes hard to tell her apart from the couple of dozen other surfers waiting for their moment. Lowerson is patient, and it's a good while before she comes cruising in on a southerly, slow-rolling wave — the kind that takes you all the way in. At this moment, none of her pro titles really matter, nor do the culture-war dramas of being the first out transgender surfer on the competition circuit. The ride is everything.

Until last week, Lowerson had spent months out of the ocean as she recovered from gender-affirming surgeries. Surfing hasn't felt the same since she came to recognize her true identity.

"It's easier," she says with a smile. "I don't have this fake front up."

It's a bright, breezy March afternoon at Surfers Point Cafe in Ventura, California. Lowerson is speaking candidly of past struggles and how she almost quit surfing when she began to transition in 2020. (She ended up contacting Surfing Australia, the country's governing body for the sport, and worked with it to implement a new policy for trans inclusion that allowed her to compete in the women's division.) Yet her mood matches the sunny calm of this beach town.

Coming ashore in Ventura, California, in March

Originally from Southwest Australia, she passes for a local with her bleached hair, ski hat, and cropped T-shirt. Lowerson, 45, has been surfing her whole life, and dominated plenty of men's events over the decades, claiming a Western Australian state title as recently as 2019. She laughs about acting like an "uber dude" back then, but recalls the difficulty of maintaining a "fake" macho persona: After a couple of weeks on the water, she'd retreat inward, afraid to leave the house for days, and battle thoughts of self-harm. "I'd try and take my life," she says. Despite her impressive career so far, it seems only now, as a woman, in an adopted country, that she has the life she was looking for.

"I've found the Californian community so much better" than the surfing scene back home, Lowerson explains. "Even the middle-aged cis white guy [here] accepts me in the water. Whereas, generally, in Western Australia, it's the polar opposite. Hopefully it changes."

Lowerson came to the States in 2023 as not just a talented surfer, but also as a craftswoman who started learning the art of board design as a teen. In collaboration with Mando, a nonbinary board shaper from California and owner of Mando Surf Co. in Carmel, she spent five years developing the Sasha Jane signature model longboard, a "nose rider" with a mermaid logo — Lowerson's is pastel pink. To become the brand's official ambassador, Lowerson is applying for a work visa, and she might eventually try for U.S. citizenship.

Of course, she still faces antagonism. Last January, the Australian surfing-gear company Rip Curl debuted an online ad featuring Lowerson on the water. In a voice-over, she describes surfing as a dance on a moving surface. There is no mention of gender or competition.

Soon after the video came out, American pro surfer Bethany Hamilton, who is sponsored by Rip Curl and had already vocally opposed the inclusion of trans women athletes in women's categories, tweeted, "Male-bodied athletes should not be competing in female sports." Though she did not name Lowerson, Rip Curl pulled the clip two days later, claiming it was for Lowerson's safety. "Which was just the biggest load of bullshit ever," Lowerson says. (Hamilton and Rip Curl did not respond to requests for comment.)

Lowerson's impulse, when Rip Curl had originally reached out, was to turn them down because of their association with Hamilton. "Then I sort of thought, 'Well, that'd be a good opportunity to get some visibility,'" she explains. In her view, the company was just "naive" about the trollish responses they'd get, despite her warnings.

The same hostility had erupted in 2022, when Lowerson won two women's divisions at the Western Australian state titles. She'd already made history as the first out trans woman to surf at the pro level two months prior; she just happened to place ninth in that event. It was taking a title that prompted outraged headlines in conservative media. "For trans athletes, it's OK for us to compete if we don't do well," Lowerson laments.

And that's assuming they're allowed to compete at all. The organizers of a May event in Huntington Beach, California — it was meant to be her first following the surgeries — barred Lowerson from participating even though they initially accepted her entry fee. She says their reasoning was based on a misinterpretation of an International Surfing Association rule that she knows inside and out. While it's frustrating, it hasn't diminished her passion. Lowerson received an outpouring of support from other pros, including members of the world-champion Hawaiian longboarding team, who encouraged her to keep competing. Meanwhile, orders are coming in for her new board, and she's working on a memoir about growing up during the Nineties surf boom.

"I don't see myself as a trailblazer," the modest Lowerson says, though she expresses a hope that "there's one girl out there that opens your magazine and says, 'She's doing it. I can do it.'"

PHOTOGRAPH BY JESSICA LEHRMAN

THE MAD SCIENTIST AN

Since 2020, orcas off the coast of Spain and Portugal have sunk several sailing vessels and destroyed hundreds of others. Renaud de Stephanis won't rest until he stops them

BY TOMAS WEBER

ND THE KILLER WHALES

THE FIVE ANIMALS TOOK AN HOUR TO PUT THE SAIL-BOAT BENEATH THE WAVES.

At the end of October 2022, four men, each in his late twenties, set sail from western France toward Lisbon. Augustin Drion, an experienced sailor from Brittany, was one of them. He had come to lend a hand to a friend from engineering school, Elliot Boyard, who owned the 39-foot sailing vessel. From Portugal, they planned to cross the Atlantic to the Caribbean. They would cruise around the islands for a year. Then they would return home.

The crew had spent several days battling thunderstorms and high waves in the Bay of Biscay, the treacherous stretch of ocean to the west of France. They felt ragged. But on the morning after Halloween, the boat, called *Smousse,* crossed into the stiller waters off Portugal and the crew was able to relax. The sun was shining. The breeze was soft, and the boat was making seven knots. For the first time, conditions were calm enough to rely on the autopilot. Drion had just finished a watch shift and decided to join the others lounging on deck. He ducked inside the cabin to grab a book.

He heard a crash. The boat shook, and Drion lost his balance. "What happened?" he shouted up to the others. There was banging on the hull from the outside. The crew looked over the side and saw black fins breaking the glassy surface. Five killer whales, each more than half the length of the boat, their glossy skin shining in the sunlight, were taking turns swimming into the back of the sailboat, ramming the rudder with their heads. With each crash, the boat jolted into a new direction.

The crew shut down the electronics and hauled in the mainsail. Speeding off, they thought, could be an invitation to chase. The animals were faster. Better to stay put, quiet and still. They sat without talking for almost an hour, drifting in open ocean. The only sounds were the deep steady blows of orca breath, the clicks and whistles of killer whale language, the crunch of several tons of marine mammal — the boat weighed about the same as one adult male — against their rudder.

After a while, Drion began to worry about the boat's structural integrity. He went down into the cockpit. This time, there was water on the floor. A steady stream flowed in from a crack in the stern. The boat was quickly flooding, and it was starting to sink. Boyard put out a mayday call. The nearest vessel was 60 minutes away, and the men inflated the lifeboat. They wanted to stay on the sinking boat for as long as possible, worried that the orcas might decide to sink their life raft, too — which would be catastrophic. But the water was rising quickly, and they all crowded into the blow-up dinghy. They looked around. The killer whales had gone. A Swedish yacht arrived to pick them up. The men watched the top of the sailboat's mast disappear beneath the swells.

ORCAS VERY RARELY GO for boats — that's supposed to be the idea, but something new is happening off the Iberian coast. Since 2020, from the top of Portugal down to southern Spain, sailors have reported almost a thousand similar attacks. Almost every day, every spring and summer, yarns from anguished captains attaching photos of their beat-up rudders fill up a Facebook group called Orca Attack Reports, which has more than 60,000 members. The epicenter of the carnage is the Strait of Gibraltar. The slim stretch of sea between Spain and Morocco, the gateway to the Mediterranean, is one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world.

NOBODY HAS DIED. BUT SAILORS WORRY IT'S JUST A MATTER OF TIME.

Many captains now carry illicit firecrackers on board to throw at the whales. Some blast death metal on Bluetooth speakers. Others bash steel sticks against their hulls when orcas approach. Orcas have sunk at least three boats and damaged hundreds more. Nobody has died. Wild orcas, as far as we know, have never killed a human being. But sailors worry it's just a matter of time, while orca biologists are anxious about captains arming themselves and taking things into their own hands. "I wouldn't be surprised if it's not too long before we see someone attempting to shoot one of these animals," says Luke Rendell, a marine-mammal expert at the University of St. Andrews.

The group of orcas that live around the Iberian Peninsula are the only killer whales that attack boats, and researchers know very little about them. There is only one scientific paper about their new hobby. The Portuguese government has advised sailors to stop moving if killer whales hit them, and wait for them to get bored — which is what Drion and Boyard did instinctively. The Spanish authorities, though, say keep going. In 2020, the Spanish government banned small sailing boats from a part of northwestern Spain. Meanwhile, the attacks are spreading. This community of orcas, documented in the Strait of Gibraltar since the Roman Empire, consists of nearly 90 animals. Some scientists believe that all of them now ram sailing boats. What triggered the behavior is unclear. One hypothesis, though, has taken off: The orcas are seeking revenge.

Orcas that have been documented attacking boats are called "Gladis" — from orca gladiator, one of the whale's scientific names. Killer whales move around in matrilineal units, a mother with up to four generations of descendants. We don't know which whale, or even which unit, was the first to start swimming into sailboats. Some believe it began in 2020 with Gladis Black — a male juvenile with a deep scar on his back from a wound, probably from a boat. Other researchers say it was Gladis White, an adult female from another unit. But whichever was the first, the others quickly began to copy them.

The notion of killer whales with vendettas against humans — whether for injuring them with boat propellers, or for picking their tuna hunting grounds clean, or for ruining the climate, or for capturing their brothers and sisters and imprisoning them in swimming pools — took the internet by storm last summer. You can buy stickers and mugs of the Gladis orcas. "Fuck them boats." "Eat the Rich." "Support for Comrade Gladis."

But these aren't superyachts. The orcas tend to leave fishing boats alone, too. The targets include humble craft, sailing boats of the kind you can buy for the cost of a cheap used car. For their owners and crew, many of whom are not, by sailing standards, especially wealthy, the attacks are terrifying. The most recent sinking was

Renaud de Stephanis wants to solve the orca issue.

last October. There is no reliable way to deter them, and sailors are completely at their mercy.

Which is why, in January 2022, the Spanish government asked Renaud de Stephanis, a 48-year-old Spanish orca expert, to figure out a solution to the problem. De Stephanis, who has a grizzled beard, shaggy hair, and bronzed aging-surfer skin, has been studying this group of orcas since the 1990s. Last December, I flew to Gibraltar, crossed the border into Spain by foot, and drove west along the coast toward a ramshackle house perched upon a cliff above the strait to spend a week with him.

His house is difficult to pinpoint in the hills above Tarifa, a hippie kite-surfing town at the southernmost tip of mainland Europe. I arrive at the door after getting lost, and a 27-year-old marine-biology intern named Maggie cracks it open. De Stephanis isn't home right now, she says. He's at sea. "Be careful," de Stephanis had warned a few days earlier on Facebook: The orcas are now in the strait. Maggie isn't sure how long he'll be. But I can wait for him here.

A shed snakeskin of a sleeping bag lies on the threadbare couch. A cold wind whistles through a broken window, and cans of energy drinks dot the coffee table. "Here, we live like Peter Pan," de Stephanis tells me a couple of days later — and in a bedroom on the first floor, which is stuffed with toys, including a couple of cuddly killer whales, Maggie points to my bunk. It's de Stephanis' daughter's room. I'm to sleep there while the nine-year-old stays with her mother in Seville.

From the top of the house I can make out the cliffs of the Moroccan coast. A procession of freight ships chugs between the Pillars of Hercules, two promontories that frame the entrance to the Atlantic Ocean: one on the European side, the other in North Africa. For ancient mariners, the two pillars were a warning: Advance no farther. They marked out the edges of the known world and the start of nothingness. According to classical mythology, the Strait of Gibraltar was Hercules' handiwork — eight miles across at its tightest point. Why would Hercules make it so narrow? To stop sea monsters from coming up into the Mediterranean, wrote Diodorus Siculus, an ancient-Greek historian. The protector of mankind had built a bottleneck for blocking civilization off from the wild.

There are three interns, and they tell me they hardly ever see de Stephanis, despite living in his little house for many months. "He has mad-scientist vibes," one of them tells me over tapas. Some days, de Stephanis remains in his bedroom morning to night, announcing "Today doesn't exist." Or he waits out bad weather and rough swells in his sleeping bag in the living room with an old movie — *Gladiator* is his favorite. But as soon as conditions are right, he slips out onto the strait again, searching for Gladis.

Which is what he's doing as I wait, passing the time trying to decipher a Spanish translation of *Moby Dick* I find on a shelf in his office, beside crossbow darts used for extracting whale biopsies. That evening, as de Stephanis steps through the door just in time for spaghetti and meatballs, I remember I'd read he was an ex-rugby player — his cetacean obsession had followed a short professional career, and he still has the physique of a feared enforcer. His wet blue eyes are a little bloodshot. They appear to intimidate the interns, who were chattering happily until the moment he walked in.

After dinner, de Stephanis kindles a log fire. He tells me about changing ancient seafaring routes, passages sailors had followed since before the ancient Romans. A few months earlier, he had announced that boats should avoid the deep waters in the middle of the strait where the orcas usually strike. Sailors obeyed, and today most vessels in the area hug the coast. Diverting boats seems to delight him. He stands up and starts pacing the living room. "Super fun," he says. "I like it."

Avoiding the hot spots is common sense. If de Stephanis gets such a kick out of rerouting the boats, though, I wonder as I watch him lope around, isn't that something he shares with the killer whales, the creatures that are his life? Everybody seems to be having a great time redirecting sailboats. But are the orcas only having fun, or are the attacks vindictive?

The morning of Jan. 10, 2023, was cloudy and calm on the Strait of Gibraltar. De Stephanis and his team of five stepped into an inflatable Zodiac and sped out of Tarifa harbor in the direction of Morocco, past the statue of Christ at the port's entrance. It was the first day of their government-funded project to understand how to deter the killer whales. First, though, the crew had to check if they were even around.

It was in these waters that once swam the first killer whales to ever be described in writing. "The killer whale, a creature that is the enemy of the other species and the appearance of which can be represented by no other description except that of an enormous mass of flesh with savage teeth," wrote Pliny the Elder in A.D. 77, "charge[s] and pierce[s] other whales like warships ramming." But in the winter, killer whales are less common in the Strait of Gibraltar. They often follow the bluefin tuna into the Atlantic, and de Stephanis didn't expect to see them. Standing on the blow-up tube on the side of the boat, he scanned the horizon.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: GREG BLACKBURN/SWNS

PHOTOGRAPH BY **SEBASTIAN LANG**

He was not ready to begin any experiments. As far as he knew, the orcas never went for inflatable boats.

Once in the deep water, though, two killer whales started approaching them quickly from behind. Their black-and-white faces were rhythmically emerging from the water as they swam, their eyes fixed on the boat. The pair got closer and closer, until one lifted the Zodiac out of the water with a gentle tap of its nose. It happened again. Everybody on the boat was knocked toward the bow. De Stephanis' heart was pounding. He worried the orcas would destroy the boat on their first day of work. "I wasn't scared," he tells me with a smirk. "OK, I was fucking scared."

The killer whales played with the blow-up craft for about an hour. Sebastian Lang, a German photographer who lives in Tarifa, had come aboard for the ride. A few years earlier, Lang had been snorkeling at a nearby spot with pilot whales, long black cetaceans with bulbous foreheads that are the only animals Iberian orcas appear to fear. One of them took Lang's arm in its mouth and swam down to the depths, delivering him back to the surface just before he passed out. As the orcas rammed the fragile inflatable, Lang zoned out again, but this time with a feeling of awe. "My brain shut off," he tells me. "I wanted to look at them for hours and hours."

De Stephanis powered back to shore at top speed. Over the next few months, he and the team ventured out as often as weather allowed. When a killer whale approached them, he stuck a GPS tracker onto its shiny back. This location data led to his recommendation that boats should avoid deep water. He experimented with keeping going versus stopping — and found that continuing led to fewer and less destructive attacks. A stationary boat, he found, makes for a better target.

He tried out a pinger that played a high-pitched sound, which some sailors say repels the whales, and found it seemed to attract them instead. He played recordings of pilot whale calls — but he worried they would drive the orcas out of the strait altogether, so he stopped. He dragged decoy rudders behind the boat to see which designs they preferred, and he deployed a prototype deterrent rudder covered with soft spikes. It appeared to be effective. What he failed to prove, though, was the reason for the behavior — although what conclusive evidence of that would look like is hard to imagine. Still, de Stephanis has a theory.

ON A BRIGHT and clear day a few months later, de Stephanis was approached by a group of orcas, including one with a deep wound gouged into his dorsal fin. It was Gladis Black. De Stephanis shows me underwater video he had taken with a GoPro attached to a stick. Beneath the boat, Gladis Black rotates into a vertical position, and presses and rubs the pointed black tip of his face against the rudder. His face and white chin are covered with scratches and scars.

Was he seeking revenge? This theory, it seemed, had originated with Alfredo López, an animal biologist at the University of Aveiro in Portugal. Lòpez believes that one of the orcas could have been harmed, perhaps by a fishing line, and that the behavior might be a response to injury. "Complete bullshit," says de Stephanis, who has known Lòpez since 1999 through attending whale conferences, and has little respect for him. "I call him 'the expert,'" he says with a mocking smile. "He's no friend of mine." He adds: "He knows I know that he has never seen an orca."

When I reach out to Lòpez, he is too busy to speak with me. His team is inundated with whale carcasses that keep washing up on the coasts, his colleague, Mónica González, tells me over email. She adds that López had seen wild orcas "many times," but that his personal history "matters little."

It's worth pointing out here that de Stephanis has attracted controversy, too. He has studied the orcas at Loro Parque, Spain's version of SeaWorld, which still keeps four animals in captivity. The conservation foundation connected to the park has also given him grant money. De Stephanis says he opposes keeping orcas in captivity: We shouldn't capture any more, he tells me — but as long as they are there, they can be useful to biologists.

Gonzàlez tells me she doesn't care what de Stephanis thinks of Lòpez's work. Still, team Lòpez and team de Stephanis battle it out in Facebook comments — and just as the attacks have become a craze among the orcas, Lòpez's trauma-and-revenge hypothesis quickly became a meme among human onlookers. "Killer whales orchestrating revenge attacks on boats," wrote the *New York Post* in 2020. "Revenge of the orcas?" asked the *Washington Post* in May 2023.

Every orca researcher I speak to agrees that Lòpez's hypothesis is implausible. Even Drion, whose experience with the orcas felt like an attack, compares the whales to a powerful dog playing rough with a small child. It feels scary, and it's certainly dangerous — but to the dog, it's just a game.

"If they really wanted to sink the boat," Drion tells me, "they would just jump on it and the game is over."

But the attacks could still be a result of how humans have harmed killer whales, de Stephanis says. In 2010, overfishing decimated the bluefin tuna population. During that period, the orcas birthed fewer calves. With fewer siblings to play with, de Stephanis wonders, were boisterous juveniles choosing boats as their playmates instead? OK — but then why are the adults joining in? That's not so surprising, he tells me. Humans aren't so different. His daughter is trying to teach him TikTok dances.

IF THEY WANTED TO SINK THE BOAT, THEY'D JUMP ON IT AND THE GAME IS OVER.

Whether or not that story holds water, de Stephanis is convinced Lòpez's trauma-and-revenge idea is wrong. The behavior is play through and through. But as de Stephanis fills the house with chaos, shouting and blasting *Independence Day* at 8 a.m., I can't shake the idea that this interpretation, that it's nothing but horseplay, overlaps almost too neatly with what he himself seems to share with the orcas.

His connection to killer whales has zero to do with what people sometimes talk about after swimming with dolphins. It has nothing mystical about it, nothing to do with wisdom, intuition, or serenity. What he shares with the animals is a rambunctious physicality, brute strength, friskiness, fluid rhythms of attention. He keeps reminding me of an unruly juvenile. Is there a chance he could be wrong? When pushed, he admits he can't rule out the trauma-and-revenge theory completely. There is, he estimates, a five percent chance it is true. In any case, the probability is not zero. "Never," he tells me. "I'm a scientist."

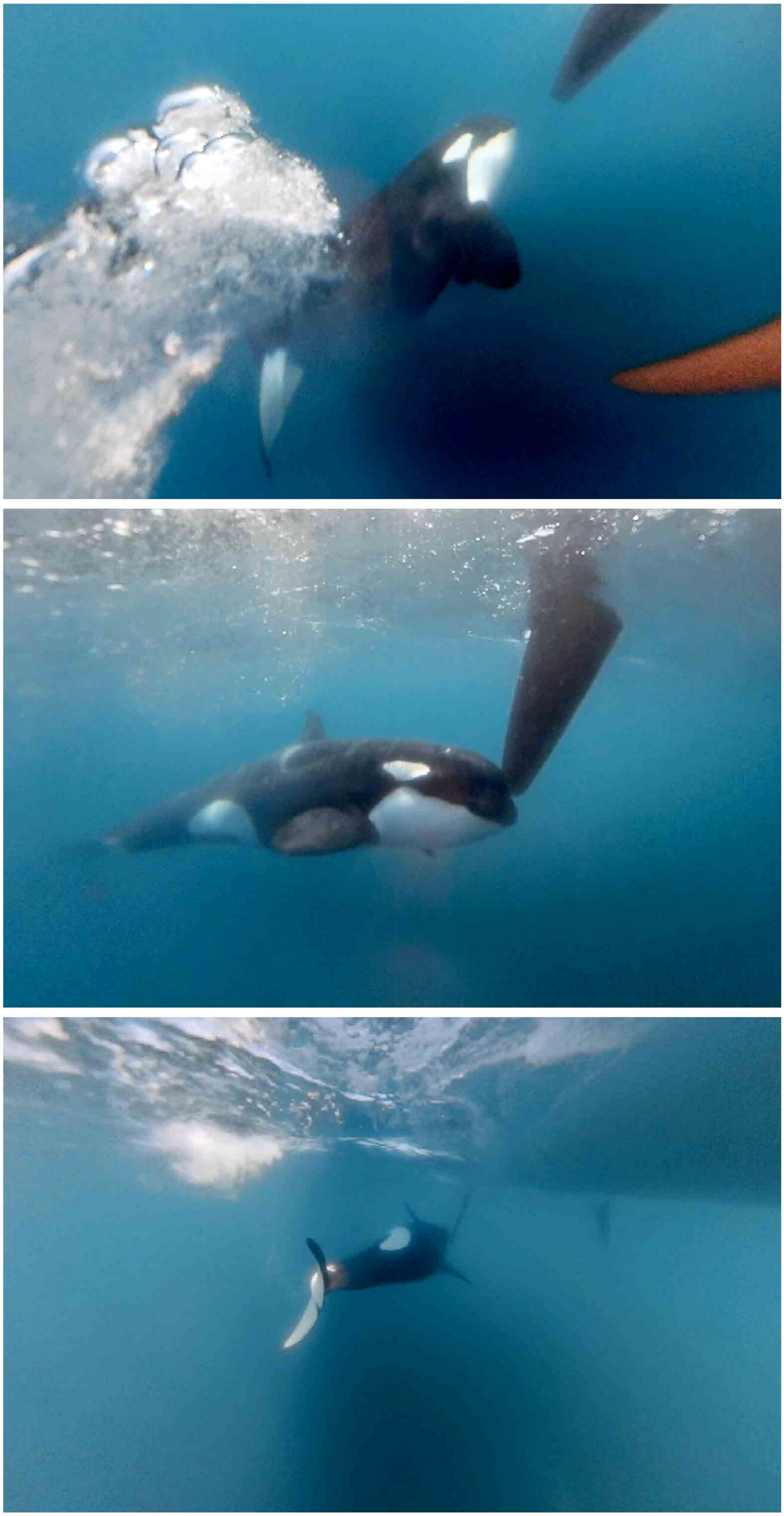
STILL, DE STEPHANIS is probably right. If the orcas do intend to destroy boats and harm people on them, they could do that easily by smashing holes in the hull — but they never do. They are obsessed only with the rudder. And the idea that the behavior developed in reaction to an injury from a fishing line, or even because of overfishing, is dubious, because the orcas very rarely, to our knowledge, attack fishing boats — for unclear reasons. More than that, though, is the fact that every killer whale scientist I speak to repeats the same thing: These creatures just don't carry vendettas.

Orcas have "one of the most elaborated brains on the planet," says Lori Marino, a neuroscientist, expert in whale behavior, and founder and president of the Whale Sanctuary Project. An orca's cerebral cortex is more convoluted, more intricately folded, than a human's — which gives them an extraordinary ability to learn, remember, think, and feel. Killer whales lead a rich emotional life, and share some complex feelings with humans, Marino says. They experience empathy, they mourn their dead, and they are probably smart enough to understand why an individual might want to harm another in vengeance — to impart a lesson, for example, or to discourage future attacks. Which makes it even more remarkable that, in the wild, orcas never do.

In the 1960s and 1970s, when orcas in the northeastern Pacific were repeatedly terrorized by boats that kidnapped their relatives and put them into captivity, they never attacked vessels of any kind. Unlike highly intelligent terrestrial mammals, such as chimps, gorillas, or humans, there is very little evidence that wild killer whales have ever sought revenge. (Although orcas in captivity have killed trainers, those animals were probably psychologically disturbed by their environment, says Marino.) When a chimpanzee steals food, the victim often retaliates. An aggrieved macaque will settle scores, sometimes attacking a family member of the perpetrator. But orcas don't do that. "They have adapted in a way that eliminates the need for aggression," says Deborah Giles, a killer whale researcher at the University of Washington.

I wanted to speak with Hal Whitehead, the co-author of *The Cultural Lives of Whales and Dolphins*, a book that gripped me for days. Over Zoom, I ask Whitehead, who is a professor of biology at Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia, why orcas might have evolved to not hold grudges against other animals. He explains that while land mammals can be territorial, territory isn't really a thing in the sea. With few fixed resources in the ocean, there's less to go to war about. "It's fluid. It's flexible. Animals are moving around, here and there," he says. And perhaps — now Whitehead is musing — we can learn something from that. "Some of us think that aggression and war are inevitable," he tells me. But if sophisticated forms of ocean intelligence can teach complex land-bound brains a lesson, he says, it is that more-equal ways of dividing up resources across territories could make war and aggression less likely.

What looks like revenge against humans, Whitehead says, is a behavior that may be a kind of culture, a way this community of orcas now



BREND SCHUIL/TEAM JAJO/THE OCEAN RACE, 3

Last summer, killer whales targeted two racing boats.

strengthens its group identity. Orca obsessions can quickly turn into collective fads. Take their eating habits. Most wild animals are not fussy gourmands. But the orcas that live in the seas around Antarctica eat tiny penguins, and when they kill them, they discard everything other than the breast muscles. Orcas that eat other whales usually enjoy only the lips and the tongue and leave the rest to wash up or rot. Each community of killer whales speaks in its own dialect, and off the coast of Australia, in a place called Shark Bay, orcas adorn their noses with ornamental sponges. In the 1980s, the salmon-eating orcas of the northeastern Pacific fashioned hats from the carcasses of their prey. They wore them all summer.

Outside of humans, the complexity and stability of these cultural forms is unparalleled. Boat ramming is just the latest of these practices. But when we, another eminent cultural animal, seek to understand what killer whales are up to, we can't help but see them through the pinhole of our own cultural practices and group dynamics. We look beneath the surface with ape eyes, and we see territoriality and retaliation where we should see cultural behaviors that have little to do with land-based violence — which results in orcas with apelike vendettas going viral.

For most of my stay with de Stephanis, the ocean is too rough to go out upon. On my last day, though, there's a window of calm, and he wants to show me the orcas before I leave. I offer to drive us to the port in my rental car. He thinks I'll probably drive too slowly, and bombs down the hill on his motorbike. At the port, we meet a man named Salva, who will control the boat while de Stephanis scans the surface for fins. We hop onto the Zodiac, motor past the Jesus statue and out into the strait, and squint into the horizon until our faces hurt.

We see hundreds of silvery dolphins breach and spin in the air. We see a pod of pilot whales and a languid sunfish drifting on the surface. We see a yacht in the distance between a stream of cargo ships, underway in deep water. The captain is resisting de Stephanis' advice. "That could get him into trouble," says de Stephanis. But the yacht will be lucky: The killer whales are nowhere to be seen. They are probably already hunting tuna in the open ocean. Perhaps, I think, they've abandoned their craze. Maybe they've even developed a new fixation.

I drive back to Gibraltar feeling a little deflated, and while I wait for my flight, I walk up the European Pillar of Hercules. Near the top, a sign warns me about macaques, the only wild monkeys that live on the continent, which "may behave aggressively." For a few minutes, I watch them lounging peacefully in the sun, then turn around and fly home.

But two months later, the orcas, fresh from the open seas, swim back into the Strait of Gibraltar. At dusk on Feb. 4, their fad apparently now their tradition, a way of life, five individuals begin to ram the back of a large sailing boat, in rough seas six miles off the coast of Tangiers. "We saw them heading straight for us," says the French captain. "Aggressive and lively and very fast."

It's the first incident in the strait of what is sure to be a perilous season. For the orcas, it marks the start of a fun-filled spring.

Reviews

Music

CHARLI XCX DANCES ON THE EDGE

Avant-pop rebel delivers a confessional LP that never loses its energy

By BRITTANY SPANOS

HEAR THIS

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Charli XCX

Brat

ATLANTIC

Who doesn't wanna dance with Charli XCX? The U.K. star has been pop's party girl since her debut, writing high-octane hits for other artists, like Icona Pop's "I Love It" and Iggy Azalea's "Fancy," while saving her most extreme and wildest avant-garde impulses for her own excellent LPs, most recently 2022's *Crash*. On her sixth album, *Brat,* she stays out later and goes harder than ever before. And while she's spinning around on the dance floor she's also spiraling out in her head, digging deep into the types of insecurities and fears reserved for the comedown the morning after.

Brat seesaws between extremes from song to song, a hyperpop roller coaster of post-Saturn return, early-thirties anxieties, and It-girl ➜

ILLUSTRATION BY
Goñi Montes

→ CHARLI XCX

bravado. The album opens with the one-two punch of "360" and "Club Classics," a pair of bouncy ragers that have Charli name-dropping famous friends Gabbriette, Julia Fox, Hudson Mohawke, boyfriend George Daniel, and *Brat* co-executive producer A. G. Cook. They're a throwback to classic club hits, the kind that don't do more than tell you to free your mind and keep dancing.

By the time we hit "Sympathy Is a Knife," it's pretty clear that Charli has only taken half of that advice. It's the first of several tracks that see her baring some of her most conflicted emotions over beats that never lose their energy. "Sympathy" relays her paranoia, the voice in her head telling her she's not enough. And even though she needs sympathy, it feels all the more painful when she gets what she wants. Later, on "Rewind," she lists all of the aspects of herself she feels shame about: her face, her weight, her fame, her chart success. On "So I," Charli is overwhelmed with regret as she thinks about her friend and collaborator Sophie, who passed away in 2021. The singer opens up about how she wished she had pulled the late artist closer, instead of being intimidated by Sophie's talent and harsh but loving critiques when the pair worked together.

"Girl, So Confusing" details a different type of relationship, as Charli unpacks a complicated frenemy dynamic with another female pop star. "You're all about writing poems/But I'm about throwing parties," she explains. Though she celebrates "Mean Girls" later on the album, this track offers an olive branch in spite of how little she and her mystery peer seem to share.

The album closes out with two of its best tracks. "I Think About It All the Time" is a gorgeous confessional about the future and motherhood, leaving existential questions about when it will be the right time for her to pursue that part of her life up in the air. Once she realizes she doesn't have all the answers, we go right into "365," the most euphoric club offering on an album brimming with euphoric club offerings; "Shall we do a little key?/Shall we have a little line?" she asks, as if the whole album was just one lengthy, drunk bathroom-queue conversation with Charli all along. And who better to have that type of soul-baring conversation in the middle of the night with?

HARLEY WEIR

AROOJ AFTAB DREAMS BIG

A visionary Pakistani artist keeps many musical traditions moving forward By BRENNA EHRLICH

Listening to Pakistani musician Arooj Aftab sing can feel a little like those first few drifting moments after you pop a bedtime melatonin. The edges of the world bleed like watercolors, and your mind weaves new tales from the frayed memories of your day. That makes sense, given that Aftab herself calls nighttime her "biggest source of inspiration."

A vocalist, composer, and producer who has taken influence from artists as diverse as Billie Holiday, Abida Parveen, and Jeff Buckley, the 39-year-old Aftab has spent her career dreamily eliding the boundaries between jazz, pop, and classical music. A track on her 2021 album, *Vulture Prince,* won a Grammy for Best Global Music Performance, a distinction that limits the scope of what she does. Last year, she collaborated with pianist Vijay Iyer and multi-instrumentalist Shahzad Ismaily for the beautifully experimental *Love in Exile,* one of 2023's best albums.

HEAR THIS

Arooj Aftab

Night Reign

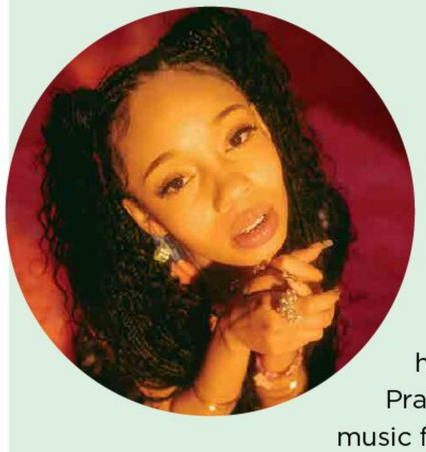
VERVE

Aftab's new LP, *Night Reign,* finds her getting even more range-y than usual. Iyer returns to layer delicate, almost Disney-eque keys into the cool-water flow of "Saaqi." Poet and experimental musician Moor Mother spits bars about the tenuous nature of reality in a fucked-up world on the doomy "Bola Na," and Cautious Clay (flute), Kaki King (guitar), and Elvis Costello (Wurlitzer) revamp a Rumi-inspired track from *Vulture Prince* into the gorgeously hectic "Last Night Reprise."

Aftab also goes to the well of tradition more than once on this record — turning the jazz standard "Autumn Leaves" into an almost foreboding nocturnal landscape, or shaping the words of 18th-century Urdu musician and poet Mah Laqa Bai into a crystalline yet triumphant track that sounds like falling asleep next to your lover on "Na Gul." This thread of poetic love is sewn in throughout the LP — sliding in like silk on album opener "Aey Nehin," floating like an intoxicating perfume on "Raat Ki Rani," and curling up like a cat on the lush "Zameen," featuring multi-instrumentalist Marc Anthony Thompson.

"Whiskey," though — one of the only English-language tracks — feels the most personal, like a dream that's more easily evoked than described. Mingling strings and the hushed sounds of tides coming to shore, the track sees Aftab giving in to infatuation, as her lover drunkenly drowses on her shoulder, and she discovers that she's "ready to give in to your beauty and let you fall in love with me." It's a singular moment of individual bliss, but anyone in the throes of new love will relate. Such is the power of Aftab's one-of-a-kind sonic vision. She has worlds in her voice, as intimate and expansive as her own imagination.

FROM TOP: SHREYA DEV DUBE; FARIS BIENEMY



BREAKING

Anycia Is the Girl Boss We Need

TWENTY-SIX-YEAR-OLD Atlanta rapper Anycia has risen rapidly thanks to the vibrant personality and entrancing baritone many first heard during her 2023 From the Block performance of "BRB." She follows through on her debut album, *Princess Pop That,* the kind of smooth listen that fits into a playlist of hustler braggadocio, except it's a woman on her boss shit. "I hope you get up out the car, and then your phone crack," she raps on "Nene's Prayer." The album further entrenches her as one of the "rap girlies" who make music for the turn-up as well as chill vibes. ANDRE GEE

Alan Cumming

The Broadway star on fame, sappy songs, and why name-dropping is OK

You seem like you're constantly working. What do you do to relax?
Just this weekend, I was up in the Catskills at my house there. I love it. I love seeing my friends and hosting them, and not necessarily being in public. I love going out and having fun and drinking, but it's also nice to do it in an environment where you're not observed. To take that away and have a home that is big enough for your friends to come over — that's one of the best things about being successful, that you can make your own space.

Cumming hosts 'The Traitors,' streaming now on Peacock.

What are some of the worst things about being successful?
The lack of anonymity and the huge level of self-consciousness. I had to walk out earlier, and a man going past gasped and said, "You're famous. Can I shake your hand?" You have to sort of galvanize yourself to open the front door and think, "OK, I'm going out into the world now." People are usually very nice. I do feel sort of beloved. But it's just constant.

What role would you say you get the most recognized for?
Spy Kids is a massive one because young adults probably saw that when they were little. I love that because people come up to me saying I've been a magical part of their childhood. It's really nice.

I used to do a thing where someone would come up to me, and before they said anything I would try and scan them like some sort of spy film. "Well-put-together woman in her mid-thirties: probably *The Good Wife*"; or "the geeky guy with a beard and a cutoff shirt: probably *X-Men*." But it's hard now because I've been around the block for so long. And then people say things like, "I love your soap."

What's a song that never fails to make you ugly-cry?
There's so many. "To Make You Feel My Love" — the Adele cover of the Bob Dylan song. That gets me partly because my brother told me that was the song he played with his ex-wife when they were nearly going to split up, and then they did. Also "And So It Goes," by Billy Joel, which I used to sing [in my cabaret show]. That was really hard to sing. I have a whole album called *Alan Cumming Sings Sappy Songs,* so that's my wheelhouse, as they say.

What do you think draws you to sappy songs?
Because you can act to them. I can only sing songs that I can act [out]. It's partly because of my sort of inferiority complex about singing. Liza Minnelli [told] me if you're scared to tell people "Come and see me in a concert," think of it like the song is a play, and you're a character in a play.

In your cabaret, you joke about name-dropping celebrities — and you just mentioned Liza.
Name-dropping is seen as a negative thing, like you're trying to show off. I'm not. It sets the scene better. I remember Jeff Goldblum, he was filming this thing with my friend, and I went to visit them on the set. I had one of those Russian hats on. And he goes, "I really like your hat." And I said, "Gosh, you know who gave me this hat? Faye Dunaway." And he said, "You know who told me never to name-drop? Bobby De Niro."

What is the best piece of advice you've gotten?
I suppose the best piece of advice was from an old, salty sea dog Scottish actor in, like, 1985, when I was 20. He played Banquo in *Macbeth* at the Tron Theatre in Glasgow, and I was Malcolm. I was fussing over some line, and he said, "When in doubt, do it with a look." Say what you mean, and do the lines with your face added to that. It's so simple, but so deadly.

Is there any role you played that you wished you hadn't taken?
There's a couple of things I've been kind of elbowed into. There's been films that I thought were gonna be great that turned out to be terrible, but I don't have any regrets about any of it. I like flouting people's expectations, and I think it's really annoying when people are like, "Why are you doing that?" I remember, years ago, I had two press junkets near each other: One was *Titus,* the Shakespeare film, and one was *The Flintstones in Viva Rock Vegas.* It was all the same journalists. I was like, "Deal with it, bitches. I'm an actor. And also, how much do you think *Titus* paid?" EJ DICKSON

ILLUSTRATION BY **Mark Summers**